

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Introduction

The role of male and female within congregations is proving to be a puzzle again to many. First, there has been a vacuum of doctrinal teaching on this subject for a decade or two. Also many students in colleges and universities today, studying to be ministers, are given more questions than answers in such studies. Again, since the culture in the Western World has changed drastically in its thinking about male-female relationships, many Christians now desire the same changes within churches. Finally, there have arisen many highly educated men within the brotherhood that have been tainted by denominational studies and schools. All these combined have had an amazing effect upon the thinking and practice of modern congregations.

Calls for a "new hermeneutic" have been heard in recent years. Some men have tired of the "old paths" and call for sweeping changes in the church. Their tactic has not been to leave and go into denominations that are closer to their thinking; rather, they have dedicated themselves to changing or restructuring the "restoration movement." One object has been to put women into adult classes as teachers, use them as public prayer leaders and song directors, and even get them into pulpits for seminars, training sessions, and forums.

Some current representative arguments have been expressed in these statements:

1. "If a man gives permission for a woman to teach an adult class, she is not 'usurping authority.'"
2. "Only Jewish churches limited the role of women; the Gentile churches did not."
3. "Our translations are deceptive due to archaic culture."
4. "Paul only limited wives, not all women."
5. "To say that women have been subjected to men is to move beyond prudent exegesis."
6. "Preachers use too many presuppositions in teaching about this role of women."
7. "Our limited hermeneutic does not consider changes in culture and times."

8. "Paul's statements were only for those in the first century and who lived in the Near East."

9. "If a woman can sing in the assembly she can also teach in the assembly."

10. "Women are equal to men before God therefore they can do anything a man can do."

11. "The majority of the commentaries take the stand of women in subjection but they are wrong."

12. "Paul's bachelorhood influenced his writings too much."

The major target of these arguments is the hermeneutic that calls for "book, chapter, and verse" interpretation, a hermeneutic that calls for a "thus sayeth the Lord." It is a hermeneutic that clings to "speaking where the Bible speaks and being silent where the Bible is silent."

"Hermeneutics" is "the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (as of the Bible)." ⁱ It answers the question "How does the Bible teach me?"

Three major principles can be used to show how the Lord instructs one through His Word:

1. Command, i.e., explicit instructions often in the imperative tense, or statements of facts to be believed.

2. Inferences, i.e., conclusions that must be drawn from implications in order for the Bible to be sensible.

3. Examples, i.e., known practices of the first disciples who followed the teaching of the apostles.

Here a "straw man" is built up by those who wish to restructure. It is said that such a "simple hermeneutic leaves out the culture of the day, the historicity, Christology, eschatology, and even the context." This may be so in some cases, but the use of command, inference, and example does not necessarily leave out anything! Careful students of the Bible are amused at such a charge since Jesus, Paul, Peter, and all the other New Testament writers used this very hermeneutic. In the present study it will be seen that context and historical setting, etc. will have been duly consulted and included.

God Has Always Used Women Prominently

Eve was the first wife and mother. She acted representatively for the female of the human race just as Adam acted representatively for the entire human race (1 Timothy 2:13-15; Romans 5:12-21). When Adam sinned physical death was a consequence upon all mankind. When Eve sinned, subjection to man was a consequence upon all women (Genesis 3:16; 1 Corinthians 11:3, 8-9).

Deborah was a judge and a prophetess in early Israel (Judges 4:4). Huldah was used as a prophetess (2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chronicles 34:22-28) and Isaiah's wife was also called a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3).

In the New Testament Anna was a prophetess at the time of the birth of the Lord (Luke 2:36-38) and Philip had four virgin daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). It should be remembered that Mary the mother of Jesus was used wonderfully as an inspired teacher when she visited Elizabeth (Luke 1:46-55) and was Jesus' teacher in their home (Luke 2:40, 51-52). Priscilla was one of the teachers of Apollos (Acts 18:26) and most commentators believe that she was the more prominent teacher on that occasion since her name is mentioned first in the Lukan account.

Paul had great women co-laborers in the Lord: Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa (Romans 16:6, 12), and also Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3).

Special mention is made of Phoebe, "a servant of the church...a helper of many, and of mine own self" (Romans 16:1-2). Note is taken here that Paul speaks of Phoebe as his PROSTATIS ("helper...of mine own self"). One lexicon defines PROSTATIS as "a woman set over others...a female guardian, protectress, patroness, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources"ⁱⁱ So it is argued that Phoebe was actually set over Paul, took the lead, in some of their work together.

It is well to note another definition: "One who stands in front or before; a leader, a protector, champion, patron...a patroness, protectress."ⁱⁱⁱ

Added to this is a comment worth noting: "in complying with this request they will only be doing for Phoebe what she has done for others, and especially for Paul himself....When she helped Paul we cannot tell...'seems to point to a deliverance from danger or sickness' in which she may have ministered to him."^{iv}

To this agrees another scholar, at least in general principle: "This may refer to a part of the deaconess's office, the attending on the poor and sick of her own sex...It is not improbable that she may have been, like Lydia, one whose heart the Lord opened at the first preaching of Paul, and whose house was his lodging."^v The assumption that Phoebe took the lead over Paul in their teaching work is not substantiated.

Then, finally, there were two other women mentioned as the special teachers of young Timothy, Lois and Eunice, which teaching was done in their home (2 Timothy 1:4; 3:14-15).

God Set Women In Congregations As Teachers.

1. In Crete. Paul said he left Titus in Crete to "set in order the things that were wanting" (Titus 1:5) as well as to appoint elders. One of the "things wanting" was the use of aged women: "that aged women likewise be...teachers of that which is good; that they may train the young women...." (Titus 2:3-5). When and where such teaching was to take place is not mentioned here, but it would be subject to any limitations found elsewhere in God's Word.

2. In Caesarea. Luke mentions four women used by God as inspired teachers, prophetesses (Acts 21:9). The office of prophet/prophetess was a special work, ordained of God, with several things to notice: (1) it was a work distinct from that of an apostle, though each apostle served as a prophet; (2) it was done under direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit; (3) prophets were superior to other teachers; (4) prophets were subject to the apostles; (5) prophets were subject to limitations in the assemblies, both men and women, for the edifying of the assembly; and (6) their inspired work was temporary (Ephesians 4:11-12; Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:1-5; 24-25).

3. In Rome. Mary was one who "bestowed much labor on you" (Romans 16:6) and

Tryphaena and Tryphosa were those "who labor in the Lord" (Romans 16:12). This "labor" implies congregational work. Paul often spoke of his teachings as "labor" (Galatians 4:11; Philippians 2:16; Colossians 1:29) and he exhorted others about the same kind of labor (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17). It is reasonable to infer therefore these women in Rome were laboring in teaching also.

Priscilla was in Rome at the time of Paul's writing (Romans 16:3-5) and she had been a well-known teacher at Ephesus (Acts 18:26). In fact the congregation used her home as the meeting place (1 Corinthians 16:19). The church was meeting later in her home in Rome and it is reasonable to conclude she continued her teaching there also.

4. In Corinth. Women prayed and prophesied in the church at Corinth else Paul would not have made certain corrections (1 Corinthians 11:5, 13). Priscilla was possibly one of those very women.

5. In Ephesus. Priscilla taught in Ephesus for a time (Acts 18:26) and in all likelihood the "widows indeed" were also teachers (1 Timothy 5:5, 9-10). They may not have been inspired teachers but their work and actions were conducive to their being teachers of younger women.

6. In Asia. John addressed the letter of 2 John to Cyria (see the footnote in the ASV), a most wonderful and hospitable lady in a church in Asia. She was a staunch supporter of teachers sent from John but she could be deluded by offering her hospitality to false teachers, thus John's warning about partaking in their evil works (2 John 9-11).

God Also Has Given Some Limitations.

1 Corinthians 12, 14

Both men and women have limitations expressly mentioned. In the assemblies men were to do only those things that edified. Men speaking in tongues were not be more than two or three. These men were to speak in turn, and if there were no interpreter they were to keep silent (14:23, 26-27). Men who were prophets were to control their gift and speak only if someone present could discern the spirit by which they spoke (12:10; 14:29). They also were limited to two

or three. All these inspired men knew they could control their gift and they could do their teaching one by one (14:31). God's Spirit in them was subject to their own will, i.e., they could either speak or not speak at any given time. They were able to be silent while another spoke even though God had given them something to say to that assembly (14:30-32).

First, concerning limitations for women, the women were to keep silent in the assemblies (note carefully the context of these verses shows it was a public assembly, 14:23).

"As in all the churches of the saints, let the women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but let them be in subjection, as also saith the law. And if they would learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home: for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church" (14:33-35; It is worthy of notice that McCord uses the translation "it is a disgrace for a woman to speak in the congregation"^{vi}).

Second, take note this is to be done "in all the churches," as this was a universal instruction. It was not inserted only for the local Corinthian culture; it applied to all congregations of the Lord regardless of race, culture, etc.

Third, this applied to women as opposed to men. If GUNE (the word used here for "women") were to be translated as "wives" (i.e., "let the wives keep silence in the churches") it would become nonsensical. Look at some things it would require and allow: (1) single women could teach, only wives of the prophets could not; (2) a widow could teach while the wives could not; (3) a divorcee could teach and wives could not; (4) a Christian lady whose husband was not a Christian could teach but a wife could not; (5) a single woman could not ask a man at home as only a wife could; (6) Philip's daughters could prophesy only until they married! On and on could go the proofs that show Paul is not speaking only to wives but to all women. The translators have not made a mistake as some psuedo scholars of the day have claimed so obstreperously.

Fourth, Paul gives to the wives (14:35) one application of a rule that was for all women (14:34). The assembly was not the place for women to interrupt, speak out, or even ask

questions. Therefore the wives could ask privately. The word GUNE is used two ways in verse 35: (1) it is used to refer to wives (GUNE) asking their own husbands privately, and (2) it is used to remind them of the general rule that women (GUNE) would be shameful if they spoke in the church. The latter use of GUNE in this verse states the general principle. The reason why the wife must ask the husband at home is because a woman (any woman) may not speak in the assembly of the church. "There is no doubt at all as to Paul's meaning here. In church the women are not allowed to speak (lalein) nor even to ask questions. They are to do that at home (en oikoi)."^{vii}

Fifth, if women speak in the assembly it is said to be "shameful." This means "base, dishonorable."^{viii} Further, it is "disgraceful for ...a woman...to speak in a meeting."^{ix} Nicoll is plain on this point when he states Paul "... is thinking of church teaching and authoritative direction as a role unfit for women."^x

Sixth, "silence" in the assembly does not refer to absolute absence of sound. Obviously the woman is included in music worship (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Since the woman is a part of assemblies where such music worship is to take place she is included in this kind of speaking and teaching. Yet silence is imposed upon women in the assemblies. The seeming contradiction is easily explained by Nicoll who connects 1 Corinthians 14:34 with 1 Timothy 2:12 "where the 'speaking' of this passage is defined as 'teaching, or using authority over a man.'"^{xi} Being part of a singing assembly does not place a woman in the authoritative situation.

Seventh, this instruction for women was not temporary. Paul spoke of this principle as a general principle and one that "also saith the law." The Law of Moses was not under consideration here but another law which predated Moses' Law is cited. It was the instruction given in Eden (Genesis 3), referred to by Christ in matters of divorce and remarriage (Matthew 19:4; Mark 10:4), used by Paul to show the Jews' relation to their former law (Romans 7:1-5), and stated as the reason why men were to lead prayers and teach while women were not to do so publicly (1 Timothy 2:8-15). Paul was offering no new principle but was only applying the original one. "This command cannot fairly be set aside as a temporary regulation due to the state of

ancient society."^{xii}

Eighth, if one considers the complete context, the relationship of man and woman since creation was stated. This context of assembly worship in chapter 14 goes all the way back even to chapter 11. There the general statement is made that "the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is man" (11:3). If this refers only to wives (remember that some claim translators have made this mistake), then correspondingly the "man" here would only be "husbands." That being the case Christ would only be the head of husbands, not single men!

A reasonable and fair conclusion is that the role of a teacher in the public assemblies is not for women. Those who urge congregations of the Lord today to use women thusly will have to answer Paul's question about their ungodly pride: "What? was it from you that the word of God went forth? or came it unto you alone?" (14:36). The Corinthians could not be so foolish as to think they could originate practices on behalf of God or that they could originate scripture. God's truth did not begin with them. If men are not foolish today but will take Paul's word as it truly is, they will understand these things are "the commandment of the Lord" (14:37).

1 Timothy 2:8-15

"I desire therefore that the men pray in every place, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and disputing...Let a woman learn in quietness with all subjection. But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness. For Adam was first formed, then Eve; and Adam was not beguiled, but the woman being beguiled hath fallen into transgression:"

Brief Analysis:

1. Paul begins the context with the duty to pray.
2. Then he explicitly discusses the difference between duties of males and females.
3. There is no explicit statement of where such prayers are to be offered.

4. The previous chapter, 3:15, Paul spoke of behavior in the house of God.

5. The assumption that Paul speaks to public prayer is valid.

6. Paul's "desires" are equivalent to definite instructions.

7. Paul's desire for men to pray in every place, coupled with his instructions for women to be silent in the assembly (1 Cor. 14) point to the conclusion that this context is speaking of public meetings.

8. Women are not excluded from praying, they are excluded from leading the prayers in the public assemblies.

9. Women are encouraged to moderate behavior and dress.

10. The behaviors rejected are relative, not absolute. As in Hosea 6:6, sacrifice is not excluded, but only that mercy is more important. Jesus spoke of food toward eternal life, but he did not exclude food that perishes (John 6:27). Paul did not reject baptizing someone; he simply meant proclaiming the gospel was more important (1 Cor. 1:17).

11. Woman is to learn in submission, she is not to have authority over man, and she is to keep silent.

12. The reason for such behavior is founded on 2 events of the creation: who was created first, and who sinned first.

Some interesting facts:

The submission "in quietness" (ASV) is closer to the usage of the prepositional phrase than "silence" (RSV, NRSV).

The learning in submission calls to mind numerous instances of women called to be in submission to their husbands.

Two infinitives, to teach and to domineer, could be a hendiadys that tells what kind of teaching a woman must not do.

However, the use of *oude*, or, indicates there are two separate actions. A woman is not to teach a man and is also not to domineer a man.

The use of "usurp" (KJV) has led many to practice some sophistry: as long as a woman does not usurp, she can teach men in public.

There is no basis for a hypothetical situation that women had been taken in by false teachers, nor that the women were yet untaught in the Bible.

The reason for the prohibitions goes back to creation.

Thus the effort to let this all be a mere matter of culture is without enough factual substantiation to be a serious objection.

Every bit of the NT instruction is cultural, given to specific people and situations in that time.

Yet, the principles have eternal applications.

The problems with dealing with this passage are not actually exegetical; the basic problem is what the contemporary church is willing to use as its authority.

Further Analysis

First, men as opposed to women are to lead the prayers. This is true because the word used for "men" (ANER) is "used in contrast to a woman"^{xiii} and "with reference to sex, and so to distinguish a man from a woman;...."^{xiv} Again it is " a male person of full age and stature, as opposed to a child or female...."^{xv} and is "never used of the female sex."^{xvi} It is rather obvious in this context since Paul contrasts the status of a man with the status of a woman (2:8-9).

Second, this praying refers to public places where men and women are usually together for prayer. If only males were present, there would be no need for the instruction. If it were private, in the home, etc., Paul would not have used such general language. To this Bloomfield adds agreement, "in every or any place [appropriated to public prayer]."^{xvii} Robertson also agrees when he says, "It is public worship, of course, and 'in every place' (en panti topoi) for public worship."^{xviii} Vincent is helpful when he says, "Wherever Christian congregations assemble. Not every place indiscriminately....but the admonition concerns the behaviour of women in religious assemblies."^{xix} It is doubtful Paul is regulating what might be the case of a man and his family in private.

Third, women, in like manner, are now addressed. Paul has entered into a series of instructions and he now addresses the women. Such language was common with Paul as he addressed a series of cases (Titus 2:3-6).

Fourth, learning in quietness (HESUCHIOS) refers to "silence, silent attention."^{xx} This word is often used for "tranquility arising from within, causing no disturbance to others."^{xxi} The apostles often used it for being peaceable, meek, and tranquil (1 Thessalonians 4:11; 1 Timothy 2:2; 1 Peter 3:4). This quietness should be understood also within the framework of another important passage, 1 Corinthians 14, as discussed above. Women are the learners and followers, men are the teachers and leaders.

Fifth, women are to be in subjection. The word used here (HUPOTAGE) means "obedience, subjection" and its verb form refers to "arrange under, to subordinate; to subject, put in subjection."^{xxii} Another lexicographer adds, "subordinating herself in every respect."^{xxiii} The relation of women to men in these circumstances is not left in doubt by the language of Paul. Paul does not limit this subjection to wives but states it as a general principle of women to men. He will point out the premise in the subsequent instruction (verses 13-14).

Sixth, to teach nor have dominion over a man means to teach in a way that domineers, takes the lead from man. The first verb, "to teach," is qualified by the second verb, "to domineer." The King James has an unhappy translation here when it uses "to usurp authority over," and one

lexicographer plainly says "The A.V. 'usurp authority' is a mistake."^{xxiv} In the word itself there is no meaning of usurpation, neither is there a word for "over" in the original text.

A good example of how one verb qualifies another is to be found in Acts 4:18: "And they called them, and charged them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus." The Jews did not forbid them to "speak at all;" rather, the Jews forbade Peter and John to speak in such way as to "teach in the name of Jesus." If they were forbidden literally to speak at all, they could not converse under any conditions. In the same way women are not forbidden to teach at all, but are limited in their teaching to situations where they do not lead men, dominating the situation in church assemblies. When men are present women cannot teach in the leading way; they are to follow, learn in quietness.

A major objection comes when it is argued the word for "to have dominion over" (AUTHENTEIO) originally was not a "literary term, but 'street talk:' for self-willed, autocratic exercise of power. In fact, this verb connotes such ruthless use of power that in secular materials it is found as synonym for 'to commit homicide.'^{xxv} Unfortunately, this author did not do his homework very well, for Thayer, after stating earlier usage included killing of others or self, plainly shows later usage was "to govern one, exercise dominion over" and cites 1 Timothy 2:12 as the example of this rendering.^{xxvi} With this agree other lexicographers.^{xxvii}

Seventh, a woman may teach in many situations, and even teach a man in some situations (if this were not so what would many poor husbands do?). Yet she must avoid any arrangements where she would be the dominate one. Therefore women would have to avoid leading and teaching in the public worship arrangements of the congregations, whether one speaks of preaching in the pulpit, teaching mixed adult classes, leading prayers, leading the song worship, etc.

Eighth, women who take the lead in congregational meetings violate God's headship principle. One must not ignore what Paul taught about man being the head of woman (1 Corinthians 11:3-5). Women stepping out of their place violate God's creative order, disobey plain scripture, and dishonor all men.

Ninth, Paul gives two reasons for this subjection to man that woman is to accept: (1) man was created first, and (2) woman sinned first. When woman stepped out of her place and took the lead with the serpent, she violated God's design. Likewise when man stepped out of his place and took the follower's position, he violated God's design. Remember that Paul taught "for neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man:" (1 Corinthians 11:9). Therefore man being "first" in creation does not refer to time, but rather to primary design. The woman was a "help meet," or "help suitable" for the man (Genesis 2:18). The ASV footnote is interesting as it adds "or answering to." The husband is the head of the wife (Ephesians 5:23) and this relationship serves as one example of God's order in His creative design. Women being silent in the assemblies of the congregations is but another example of the same principle that began in Creation.

Conclusion

The importance or equality of women is not the question. The question is the creative design of Jehovah and whether or not congregations are willing to follow that which began at Eden. If it is "old fashioned" to thus believe, there is comfort in the fact this truth is, by God's decree, as old as mankind.

Women have every opportunity to use their God-given talents though they have limitations they must respect. There are multiple times and places where women can use their talents to speak, teach, declaim, instruct, and exhort. Just as there are times when men are limited, there are also limitations upon women in the use of their talents.

Different functions between the sexes are easy to recognize, but none imply inferiority. Is the man inferior because he cannot conceive, give birth to, and nurse children? Is the woman inferior because she cannot impregnate? Is the one who says "Amen" at the giving of thanks inferior to the one who spoke aloud (1 Corinthians 14:16)?

How beautiful is the thought of one translation: "Likewise, husbands, live understandingly with your wives, as with those who are more delicate;"^{xxviii} Though the ladies are "more delicate"

they are not in any way inferior.

Sadly "forbidden fruit" is being offered again today to women under the guise of equality. It is no more pleasing to God today than it was in the Garden of Eden. Let serious students of God's Word beware.

ENDNOTES

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- x. W. Robertson Nicoll, op. cit., p. 915.
- xi. W. Robertson Nicoll, op. cit., p. 914.
- xii. W. Robertson Nicoll, *ibid.*
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- xiv. Joseph H. Thayer, op. cit., p. 45.
- xv. Bagster, op. cit., p. 29.
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- xx. Bagster, op. cit., p. 189.
- xxi. W. E. Vine, op. cit., p. 914.
- xxii. Joseph H. Thayer, op. cit., p. 645.

xxiii. Arndt and Gingrich, *op. cit.*, p. 847.

xxiv. Marvin R. Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

xxv. Michael C. Armour, Male-Female Relations in the Church: Re-examining the Presuppositions, a private paper published for Yosemite Encampment, July, 1991, p. 5.

xxvi. Joseph H. Thayer, *op. cit.* p. 84.

xxvii. Bagster, *op. cit.* p. 59;

Arndt and Gingrich, *op. cit.* p. 121.

xxviii. McCord, *op. cit.* 1 Peter 3:7, p. 437.