

The Role of Women in the Church

Introduction

Years ago, my wife and I visited an Evangelical Free Church. The adult Sunday school class of several men and women greeted us warmly, and then we sat in the front row. Then the song leader informed us all that the regular teacher could not make it, so a very qualified substitute teacher had come instead. After an awe-inspiring introduction to this teacher named "Gene," the teacher turned the pulpit over to the speaker. When the teacher came forward, I soon saw that the one I thought had been a "Gene" actually was a "Jean"! She did an excellent job preaching to the class, but I still had some lingering questions...

A young woman became a good friend of mine one summer while we traveled together in America and Europe with a Christian music group called the Continentals. Over the years after that summer, Joan and I corresponded. One day, I noticed that the return address on her letter was from Berkeley, California. To my amazement, her remarks in the letter revealed that she was attending the American Baptist Seminary to become a church pastor. "Rev. Joan" has been ordained now for many years.

The role of women in the church has been debated extensively over the past 50 years in response to the emphasis on the equality of men and women. Many denominations now ordain women into ministry, and within most churches, women enjoy the freedom to minister that was suppressed for centuries. This debate is generally good, forcing evangelicals to return to the Scriptures for answers.

However, this controversy has at least two problems. The first problem is that biblical teachings have taken a back seat to pragmatism and the world's philosophies for many Christians. The second problem is that even when one does turn to the Scripture, some apparent contradictions on the role of women cause believers to be confused regarding whether God has a definitive answer on the issue. Since the Bible is the only reliable authority for faith and practice, this study will evaluate these passages to clarify some confusion.

Problem Passages on the Role of Women

A glance at the key NT passages on the role of women in the church can at first seem irreconcilable. In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul allows women to pray and prophesy in church publicly. However, three chapters later, he commands women to remain silent in the churches (1 Cor. 14:34). How can we reconcile these two passages? Then, in 1 Timothy 2:11-12, Paul confounds us more by asserting that women should receive instruction with submissiveness, not teaching or exercising authority over men. Therefore, in the first text, women are to speak publicly; in the second, they are to say nothing at all; and in the third, they are to remain quiet (but not necessarily silent). How can Paul's teaching on this critical subject be harmonized?

Various Attempts to Harmonize Paul's Teaching

The three passages mentioned above have been explained in several different ways:

- 1) Paul changed his mind between 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Corinthians 14 (with 1 Timothy 2:11-12), withdrawing the former passage's allowance of public prayer and prophecy.¹

Response: A fickle apostle can hardly be described as under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit!

- 2) The 1 Corinthians 14 prohibition refers to teaching with an authoritative direction for the church, but the other two texts allow prayer and prophecy to be part of their regular ministry.²

Response: The three passages do not distinguish the amount of authority inherent in each situation. Also, why would not a "regular ministry" be considered authoritative?

- 3) Women are allowed to pray and prophesy in general (1 Cor. 11), but the prohibitions are designed to discourage hysterical outbursts (1 Cor. 14:33, 40)³ and to maintain the doctrinal integrity of the church by not allowing any uninstructed persons to teach in the body (1 Tim. 2:11).⁴ Therefore, the latter two passages are not applicable today except in situations concerning unruly conduct and false teaching.

Response: Hysterical outbursts are not noted in 1 Corinthians 14:33, 40 and 1 Timothy 2, which do not indicate that women are to refrain from teaching because they are not as well instructed. It refers back to the creation account as evidence for women's subordination.

- 4) Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2:12 is best translated as "I am not presently permitting a woman to teach or to have authority over men..." with the meaning that "the verb tense cannot be made necessarily into a general principle for all time" and the infinitive "to have authority" is literally "to domineer."⁵ The "silence" of 1 Corinthians 14:34 is qualified in that it relates only to questions that women are to reserve for their husbands at home (v. 35), and whatever praying or prophesying they do must be done under the inspiration of the Spirit (1 Cor. 11:5).⁶ Therefore, women can pray and prophesy today.

Response: To claim that Paul's use of the present tense meant that the practice was limited to his own time is only speculation. It more likely means that this was his usual practice, especially given his appeal to the creation account for support (1 Tim 2:13ff.). Also, the Greek word *authenteo*, "to exercise authority," does not necessarily have a negative connotation, such as is true of "to domineer."

- 5) Paul did not make the statement in 1 Corinthians 14:34, which advocates that women be silent in the church since this was added sometime later by someone seeking to conform the church to a more traditional, "Jewish" position.⁷ Also, he did not author the 1 Timothy passage.⁸ This leaves only the 1 Corinthians 11 passage as authentic.

Response: No textual support exists to question the authenticity of either of these passages.

- 6) Women praying and prophesying are allowed in 1 Corinthians 11, but 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 prohibit women from teaching men.⁹ Therefore, the latter two passages do not limit women in public prayer and prophesying.

Response: Teaching is not the subject addressed in 1 Corinthians 14. The context concerns prophecy and tongues. Also, one should wonder why prophesying would be allowed but teaching excluded. Finally, public prayer for women is prohibited by 1 Timothy 2:8.

- 7) Women are not allowed to speak publicly in church (1 Cor. 14:34), which includes teaching men (1 Tim 2:12). The 1 Corinthians 11 permission to pray and prophesy is only hypothetical since "we are not sure whether St. Paul contemplated the *possibility* of women prophesying in exceptional cases."¹⁰

Response: It makes little sense that Paul would devote half a chapter to a situation that was not occurring. The rest of the epistle addresses actual problems, not hypothetical ones. Also, Paul does not prohibit the practice of women praying and prophesying.

- 8) Women cannot judge prophets in 1 Corinthians 14, which is an entirely different situation than their permission to pray or to prophesy in the church according to 1 Corinthians 11.¹¹

Response: 1 Corinthians 14 limits women from speaking with authority in the church, not simply judging prophets. Otherwise, we would expect Paul to use the verb "to judge" rather than "to speak."

- 9) The prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12 that prohibit speaking and teaching men apply only to married women whose husbands were present in the assembly, whereas 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 applies to all other women.¹²

Response: Although these first two texts may apply to married women, nothing in 1 Corinthians 11 suggests that it is limited to single women and women with unsaved husbands.

- 10) 1 Corinthians 11 has informal meetings in view (e.g., mid-week prayer meetings, etc.), but 1 Corinthians 14 refers to the more formal Sunday worship service.¹³

Response: Formal/informal contrasts are forced since church worship took place in homes anyway. Paul seems to address the entire church by the phrase “nor do the churches of God” (1 Cor. 11:16b) and women ministering to men privately would have been inappropriate.

- 11) A woman’s prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11 refers to preaching, which is allowed of women today, indicating that the speaking limits in 1 Corinthians 14 do not include *all* speech.¹⁴

Response: Preaching is not the same as prophecy. Preaching interprets God’s Word, whereas prophecy is uninterpreted (2 Pet. 1:20-21). This view also does not address 1 Timothy 2, which prohibits women from teaching men, which would be included in preaching.

- 12) The prohibition of 1 Corinthians 14 is the general rule, and the prophesying of 1 Corinthians 11 is the exception occurring only in the Corinthian church—a practice which Paul did not necessarily approve (he only regulated it with the use of the veil). The principle of silence also applies in 1 Timothy 2, where women are not allowed to teach men. “It is only too apparent that the early church did not allow its women to participate audibly in public worship. That included preaching, praying in mixed company, and teaching men in public.”¹⁵

Response: Most (if not all) views above see 1 Corinthians 11 as the general rule on women’s role in the church. Yet this emphasis upon 1 Corinthians 11 is unnecessary, especially since the central teaching in this chapter is to illustrate with a head covering the woman’s position of subordination to man (her role in the church service is not the emphasis). Undoubtedly, the women in Corinth prayed and prophesied in the church, but Paul did not condone this practice, and we find no evidence of women leading worship in any other NT church. In 1 Timothy 2:8, he states explicitly that it should be the *men* who are to pray in the worship service.

- 13) 1 Cor 11 refers to hair as a head covering, but 14 applies only in the public service.

Response: This view deserves more study as it may be correct.

Therefore, the prohibition of 1 Corinthians 14 is the general rule, and the prayer and prophecies of 1 Corinthians 11 are the exception. Chapter 11 concerns the women’s position, but chapter 14 relates to the women’s public activity, indicating that chapter 14 should be the norm for worship. This priority of silence is also consistent with the prohibition from teaching men in 1 Timothy 2.

Conclusion

Both 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 teach that the men in a congregation should lead in worship. Women should “remain silent” in the sense of public preaching, public prayer in the services of the church and teaching men in public (Priscilla’s ministry to Apollos was approved of God as a *private* ministry in Acts 18). These limitations, of course, do not bar women from *all* ministries since older women are commanded to instruct the younger women (Tit. 2:4) and all women may teach children and serve the church in numerous other ways.

Finally, Charles Ryrie writes,

There are many times on both the home and foreign fields when there are simply no men to do the work. In such instances this writer feels that we need to remember that Paul not only commanded that things be done decently and in order but also that they be done. In such cases, then, one feels that it is better to do the work with qualified women—even though this is not the ideal—than to sit back and do nothing simply because there are no men. However, women must be cautioned against continuing in such work after there are trained men available for the job.¹⁶

To this I can heartily agree.

Endnotes

¹Thomas Charles Edwards, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1885), 381.

²F. Godet, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1887), 2:915.

³Irene M. Robbins, "St. Paul and the Ministry of Women," *Expository Times* 44 (January 1935), 186.

⁴Austin H. Stouffer, "The Ordination of Women: YES," *Christianity Today* (February 20, 1981), 258.

⁵Don Williams, *The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church* (Ventura: G/L Publications, Regal Books, 1977), 112; David M. Scholer, "1 Timothy 2:9-15 & the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry," in *Women, Authority & the Bible*, ed. Alvera Michelsen (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986): 193-219 says that Paul's prohibition related only to women at Ephesus who were succumbing to false teachers and is not a timeless principle.

⁶Williams, 71.

⁷Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 699; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 246.

⁸Robbins, 185.

⁹George W. Knight III, "The Ordination of Women: NO," *Christianity Today* (February 20, 1981), 262; H. Wayne House, "The Speaking of Women and the Prohibition of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July-September 1988): 310. James B. Hurley says most interpreters have held this view ("Did Paul Require Veils or the Silence of Women? A Consideration of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 and 1 Cor. 14:33b-36," *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (Winter 1973): 190.

¹⁰Godet, 324-325.

¹¹James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 188-194.

¹²David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 541.

¹³Harold R. Holmyard III, "Does 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Refer to Women Praying and Propheying in Church?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (October-December 1997): 461-72; John MacArthur, Jr., *1 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 256; W. E. Vine, *1 Corinthians* (London: Oliphants, 1951), 147; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 437.

¹⁴Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994), 219.

¹⁵Charles C. Ryrie, *The Role of Women in the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 80; Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 2d ed., The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), 230; Leon Morris, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 201.

¹⁶Ryrie, 80.