

The Role of Women in Worship

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Synopsis: *Over the last few years the trend has been to expand the role of women in worship. This lesson will address the question of women addressing the assembly, “testifying”, and speaking during the partaking of the Lord’s Supper. This lesson might also address whether or not women may serve the Lord’s Supper.*

Introduction:

- I. There is an important need in our day and time to discuss the role of women in the work and worship of the local church.
 - A. Many in the denominational world have thrown off any limitations of Biblical authority and have gone completely into error concerning the role of women.
 - B. Many of us have been in the Lord’s church long enough to know that whatever is popular in the denominational world will sooner or later appeal to some of our brethren.
 - C. We know of congregations in various places who have allowed women to occupy positions of authority over men in the local church.
 - D. Thus it is critical for us to understand what the Bible teaches concerning a woman’s role in the work and worship of the local church.
- II. We need to acknowledge at the outset of this study that a woman’s role in the local church is significant.
 - A. Various women contributed to the support of Jesus and His apostles “*out of their private means*” (Luke 8:3).
 - B. Dorcas was known for her “*deeds of kindness and charity*” among the other widows (Acts 9:36).
 - C. Aquila and his wife Priscilla taught Apollos “*the way of God more accurately*” (Acts 18:26).
 - D. Paul spoke of the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19), and said that they had “*risked their own necks*” on his behalf (Romans 16:3-4).
 - E. Phoebe was a servant of the church in Cenchrea (Romans 16:1-2).
 - F. Mary “*worked hard*” among the Romans (Romans 16:6).
 - G. Tryphaena and Tryphosa are called “*workers in the Lord*” (Romans 16:12).
 - H. Many other examples can be found on the pages of the N.T. of the work and influence of godly women.
- III. **If it were not for worthy women local churches would have a difficult times existing in this or any generation!**

WOMEN ARE SUBORDINATE BY DIVINE DECREE:

- I. **Ephesians 5:22-24.**
 - A. By Divine decree, man is to be the “*head*” of the woman in the church and in the home.
 - B. According to this text, man’s headship rests upon two things:
 1. Creation.
 2. Woman’s role in the fall.
 3. Concerning creation, the Bible teaches (Genesis 2:18-20) that the woman was made for the man, not the man for the woman (see also 1 Cor. 11:8-9).
 - C. Concerning the woman’s role in the fall, Eve believed Satan’s lie that she might become as God, and hence was deceived (Genesis 3:13; 2 Corinthians 11:3).
 1. Adam labored under no such deception (1 Timothy 2:14; Genesis 3:12).
 2. Accordingly, a part of Eve’s punishment involved subjection – “*Yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you*” (Genesis 3:16).
- II. This in no way suggests that women are inferior to men, but it does mean that they are to be subordinate in rank to man.
- III. Neither does this mean that women are inherently more gullible than men.
- IV. Also note that as Christ’s subjection to the Father involved no removal of dignity (Philippians 2:5-11), so there is none inherent in the woman’s subjection to man.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

- I. There are two passages in the N.T. which set forth limitations on the role of women in the work and worship of the local church: 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.
- II. **1 Corinthians 14:34-35.**
 - A. The context shows that this passage contains a specific application of a general rule.
 - B. The language indicates that the instructions were addressed to a particular group of women in the church at Corinth.
 1. The women under consideration were married women (“...*their own husbands,*” v. 35).
 2. Married to Christian husbands who could instruct them in the word of God.
 3. The specific instructions to “*ask their own husbands*” did not apply to those women who were unmarried or to those who were married to unbelievers.
 4. It is possible (perhaps likely) that the women being addressed were the wives of men who possessed spiritual gifts such as prophecy and tongues.

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5. Instead of interrupting the assembly, they were to ask their husbands at home if they wanted to know the teaching of God.
- C. Why was it wrong for this particular group of women to speak in the assembly?
1. Are we to conclude that they were the only ones who were to remain silent?
 2. Could other women (unmarried, married to unbelievers) speak?
 3. No – because it was a shame for **any** woman to speak in the assembly.
 4. The general rule is given in verse 35: *“for it is improper [shameful, ESV] for a woman to speak in church.”*
 5. It was upon this basis that Paul made application to a specific situation at Corinth.
 - a. General Rule – It is shameful for women to speak in the assembly.
 - b. Specific Application – Let your women keep silent, and if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home.
- D. The contextual meaning of three words (“church,” “speak” and “silent”) provides a key to understanding how and when this passage applies.
1. **Church.**
 - a. The word *“church”* (or something similar, such as *“in the church”*) appears some 7 times in the chapter, including verse 35.
 - b. In this context the word clearly refers to the *general assembly* of the local church.
 - 1) *“However, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.”* (v. 19)
 - 2) *“Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?”* (v. 23)
 - 3) *“What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”* (v. 26)
 - 4) *“But if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.”* (v. 28)
 - c. Paul is clearly referring to a local assembly, a gathering of the local church, a coming together of the whole church in one place and at one time.
 - d. What about Bible classes?
 - 1) At various times brethren have argued that when the local church conducts Bible classes, it is the church assembled, even though

divided into smaller groups meeting in separate rooms – according to this argument the church has still come together in one place.

- 2) First of all note that a modern “Bible class” arrangement is obviously not under consideration in 1 Corinthians 14.
 - a) Only one person was permitted to speak at a time (vv. 27-31), thus only one lesson was delivered at a time.
 - b) What was done in this assembly was intended for “all” (v. 31, where the word “all” is used three times).
 - c) All learned together because all were together in one place hearing the same lesson.
 - d) This is the kind of assembly in which women are to remain silent.
- 3) Furthermore, the assembly of 1 Corinthians is a divine arrangement (v. 37), whereas the Bible class arrangement is an expedient human arrangement.
 - a) Classes are not required by divine authority.
 - b) They are authorized under the generic authority for the local church to teach God's word.
 - c) It falls under the category of that which is allowable, not that which is required.
 - d) It cannot be scripturally defended as absolutely essential to please God.
- 4) Brethren who use this passage to prevent women from teaching in a Bible class arrangement are misapplying the passage and taking it out of its context.

2. **Speak & Silent.**

- a. Does Paul use these two words in 1 Corinthians 14 in an absolute, unqualified sense, or are they qualified in their meaning?
- b. Does “*silent*” mean “never say a word, period?”
- c. If so, women could not sing or participate in any audible way in the assembly.
- d. Clearly both words are qualified in their meaning in our text.
 - 1) They are both used with reference to men (vv. 27-29) and women (vv. 34-35).
 - 2) What they mean in one case they must mean in the other.

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- e. It is evident that Paul uses the word “*speak*” in the sense of addressing the assembly (being an instructor or addressing the entire assembly).
 - f. It was proper for men to “*speak*” (address the assembly).
 - 1) Men were the tongue-speakers.
 - 2) Men were the prophets.
 - 3) It was the men who were instructed to speak one-at-a-time so that all might learn.
 - g. By the same token, it was forbidden for the women to “*speak*.”
 - 1) Address the assembly.
 - 2) Christian women were forbidden to do what Christian men were instructed to do when the church was assembled.
 - h. **The only restriction imposed on women in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is that she cannot be the sole “addresser” of the assembly of the local church!**
 - i. To make this passage mean anything else or apply it to any other arrangement is to do violence to the text.
 - j. “*Silent*” is the textual opposite of “*speak*” in this text – it is used contextually in the sense of not addressing the assembly.
 - k. Both men and women are to keep “*silent*.”
 - 1) Men when another man is speaking.
 - 2) Women at all times.
- III. **1 Timothy 2:8-15** offers a general statement of the will of God on the subject of women working with men in the church.
- A. Some questions raised by the restrictions given by Paul in this text:
 - 1. Do these restrictions apply only to activities of the local assembly, or to they apply to a Christian woman’s demeanor in general?
 - 2. In what sense is a women not permitted to teach?
 - 3. In what sense is the word “*quiet [silence, KJV]*” being used in this passage?
 - B. Many try to limit this context to public worship, but the context indicates that the scope is much broader than that.
 - 1. The evidence leads to the conclusion that the teaching of this passage does not just apply to the assemblies of the local church, but to other situations as well.
 - 2. Thus, it applies in the home as well as in the assemblies of the local church; in private as well as in public.
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3. There is nothing in this context which indicates that its application should be limited to the local church assembled, or even to Bible class arrangements.
 4. Certainly the instructions about modesty (v. 9) and childbearing (v. 15) are related to the woman's total responsibility to the Lord.
 5. In the text, Christian men are instructed to pray "*in every place, lifting up holy hands*" (v. 8), not just in the assembly.
 6. Christian women are instructed to "*adorn themselves with proper clothing [in respectable apparel, ESV]*" – does that teaching apply only when the church is assembled, or are they to dress modestly at all times?
 7. Christian women are told to "*quietly receive instruction [learn quietly, ESV; silence, KJV] with entire submissiveness.*"
 - a. Are they to learn in subjection only in church assemblies where public worship is offered, in church-arranged Bible classes, or are they to learn with all subjection at all times?
 - b. As noted in our discussion of the teaching in 1 Corinthians 14 (see above), the word "*quiet*" (silence, KJV) is qualified by its contextual use.
 - c. The word in this passage has reference not so much to one's speech as to a total manner of life.
 - 1) NOT total silence or they could not sing in worship.
 - 2) "Quietness; a description of the life of one who stays at home doing his own work, and does not officiously meddle with the affairs of others." (Thayer)
 - 3) It enjoins not the total absence of speech but a quiet life and a peaceful demeanor in which one fulfills his or her proper role.
 8. The correct answer to these questions should be obvious – the teaching of 1 Timothy 2:11-12 applies to other times besides those when the church is assembled.
- C. If women are commanded to teach (cf. Titus 2:3-4), and if they are forbidden to teach (1 Timothy 2:11-12), then the only valid conclusion we can reach is that different **kinds** of teaching are under consideration in these two passages.
1. Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2:12, "*I do not allow [permit, ESV] a women to teach,*" refers to a particular **kind** of teaching – it cannot be understood properly as an absolute, unqualified prohibition.
 2. It is qualified by the following phrase: "*or exercise authority over a man,*" which is explanatory in nature, identifying the **kind** of teaching a woman is forbidden to do.
 - a. She cannot teach in any capacity that would place her in a position of exercising "*authority*" over a man.
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- b. It means to “act authoritatively; to exercise authority; to govern one, or to exercise dominion over one.” (Thayer)
 3. R.C.H. Lenski points out that the word “*nor*,” translating the Greek word OUDE, is explicative in force; that is, it is explanatory.
 4. Thus, the kind of teaching forbidden to a woman is the kind which involves the exercise of dominion (authority) over a man.
 5. If the limitation was absolute and unqualified, the women would be forbidden from teaching at all, including teaching other women or children.
 6. Consequently, it is clear that it is a woman’s relationship to man which qualifies the limitations upon her teaching as revealed by Paul in this passage.
- D. In summary, 1 Timothy 2:11-12 prohibits a woman from preaching to an assembly, or from having dominion over a class (group) where men are present.
1. This passage does not forbid a woman from teaching a class of women or children.
 2. Neither does it prohibit her from engaging in discussions where the Bible is being taught, where she is the student and not the teacher.
 3. She is not to “*exercise authority*” over men in either case.
- E. Paul shows that this command is not cultural in nature (1 Timothy 2:13-14).
1. This principle applies at all times and places and not just to the time in which it was written (cf. 1 Tim. 2:8; 1 Cor. 4:17; 14:33-34).
 2. In 1 Timothy 2:13-14 we have the reason for a woman’s subjection to the man – by creation man has a natural position of authority over women in the church and home.

PERVERSIONS OF THIS BIBLICAL TEACHING ARISING AMONG OUR BRETHREN:

- I. For centuries, questions and controversies have existed among religious people over the role of women in the work and worship of the local church – those controversies seem to have escalated significantly during the past 50 years as we have moved into a “postmodern” age.
- II. Our brethren have not been immune from these controversies, although, as is often the case, we have been slow to follow the progressivism of the religious world in general.
- III. Two extreme positions have arisen among our brethren:
 - A. Some have concluded that the Bible authorizes women to preach, serve as elders and deacons, and hold other positions of authority within the local church.

1. This is the position of a number of progressive (no insult intended, GCK) brethren, including Jay Guin, Bobby Valentine, Keith Pruitt, Carroll Osborn, et. al.
 2. "The Bible says that in God's eyes there is neither male nor female. It means what it says. Passages that apparently limit women's role are written for a temporary cultural situation that no longer exists (much like the command of the Holy Kiss)." (Guin, p. 142)
 3. "I believe that most uses of 1 Timothy 2 are illegitimate wresting of Scripture. Failures in both exegesis and hermeneutical approach mar typical use of the text. It is not a trump card against female participation in the assembly of the church. It is clear that Paul does not want women (or men!) to domineer other Christians." (Valentine)
- B. At the opposite extreme, some have concluded that the Bible forbids women to speak at all in church assemblies, even going so far as to prohibit women from teaching Bible classes composed of children and/or women.
1. This issue was perhaps the major "women" issue among our brethren in the 1960s, 70s and even on into the 80s.
 2. In 1972, TORCH Magazine carried a four-part written debate (May – Sept.) between Dudley Ross Spears and Bernard Bolton, in which Brother Bolton denied the proposition, "The Bible teaches that women may be used in a teaching work done by the local church of Christ as in commonly practiced in Bible classes."
 3. In December, 1979, I attended all four nights of a debate in the Dayton, Ohio area between J.W. Holcomb and Weldon Warnock.
 4. For two nights, Brother Holcomb affirmed the "negative" proposition, "When the church comes together for the purpose of studying the Bible, and uses the class arrangement, it is a violation of the Scriptures for women to be appointed teachers of any of those classes."
 5. Although small in number now, churches practicing Holcomb's position remain scattered throughout various areas, especially in Eastern Kentucky.
- C. At the present time it seems to me that most of the brethren with whom I have been accustomed to associate occupy one of two positions that both lie somewhere in-between these two extreme positions.
1. **# 1** – Women are prohibited from speaking when the local church is assembled for worship, and she may not at any time teach in such a way as to exercise authority over a man.
 - a. There are some notable exceptions to this general rule.
 - b. She may participate in congregational singing; confess faith in Christ prior to baptism; and confess sins before the assembly.

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2. **# 2** – Women may not take leadership roles (lead singing, speak in any way that would be exercising authority over a man, etc.), but they may, under certain conditions, speak during an assembly.
 - a. Although I have not “seen it with my own eyes,” I have heard testimony from Christians who have observed situations where women spoke during the assembly of a local church, during the eating of the Lord’s Supper.
 - b. It is not my intention to say – **and I am not implying** – that this sort of activity takes place in every worship gathering among our “non-traditional” brethren, or even that it takes place every first day of the week in the churches where it does occur.
 - c. I have had no personal dealings with brethren of this mind-set who meet in other places – my knowledge is limited to what I have heard about a group that meets near where I live in Bowling Green, Kentucky.
 - IV. These extreme positions result from people either completely *rejecting* the plain commands of Scripture; from a failure to consider their context; or perhaps simply from an “I-don’t-care, it makes me happy” attitude.
 - V. There are some have honest questions about the nature and extent of the limitations that are placed upon women.
 - A. For example, is it always wrong for a woman to *teach* or *correct* a man?
 - B. Do women violate Bible teaching by answering questions in a *Bible class*?
 - C. May a woman answer a public question about an absent member?
 - VI. God has spoken to these things, and may He help us all in locating the true answer to questions like these by diligently searching His word!

CONCLUSION:

- I. Women are not:
 - A. To preach or teach when men are present.
 - B. To pray publicly when men are present.
 - C. To be elders or deacons.
 - D. To wait on the Lord’s Table or lead in song.
 - E. To usurp authority in the local church or in the home in any way.
- II. This in no way degrades the woman any more than Christ is in His subjection to the Father.
 - A. Women have an important place in the local church, but it must be in subordination to the man.

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- B. In this position she will glorify God.
- III. Godly Women can contribute by:
- A. Teaching other women and children.
 - B. Being a “*helper suitable*” for her husband, act as hostess in various activities (1 Timothy 3:11).
 - C. Be a dedicated servant of the church, (Phoebe) a fellow worker, support the men. (Romans 16:1-5).
 - D. Assist the needy with the softness and warmth that only a woman can give.
 - E. Show hospitality - many of our gospel meetings depend very much on the love and hospitality of our sisters.
 - F. Other areas such as visiting the sick, and attending to those in sorrow.
 - G. Teaching other women to lead chaste lives (Titus 2:4-5).
 - H. Women can work to win souls.
 - 1. Priscilla helped her husband teach Apollos the way of the Lord more perfectly (Acts 18:26).
 - 2. Women can lead others to Christ by their manner of living (1 Peter 3:1-2).
 - I. The church needs God fearing and loving women to play their rightful parts.
 - 1. The Bible is written for the common people to understand and it will leave the unbiased reader to draw a simple conclusion on the role of women in worship and in the home.
 - 2. Christianity does not keep her women in bondage, but elevates her to a position of honor and respect that is due to her as a special and unique person.
 - J. For a woman to stand before a congregation to lead in any capacity is to clearly go beyond the teaching of the New Testament.
- IV. The root cause of this feminist movement within the church is a failure to submit to the righteousness of God as revealed in the Gospel.
- A. What is the solution?
 - B. If we want to be right, we must come back to the truth!
 - C. “The current feminist issue with its influence upon the church may seem so complicated, but the solution is simple. As in all the churches of the saints, let the women keep silence in the churches. God does not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. Only if we submit to God’s righteousness, only if we have the attitude that says, ‘Speak Lord, thy servant heareth’ (1 Sam. 3:9), can we have God’s approval. The scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35).” (Leon Mauldin)
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