

The Role of Women in the Church

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Introduction

Galatians 3:26-28 says, "For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus."

Paul says some pretty dramatic things in this passage:

- the boundary line between Jews and Greeks has been abolished, the wall of partition which God himself had raised through the Law was gone, no longer a distinction between the two
- the boundary line between slave and free is overcome
- the distinction between male and female is done away with; in Christ, within the community of Christianity, women are now just as important as men

Women in the 1st Century

Paul's statement was dramatic because in Paul's time, to many of the Greeks, women were not considered as important in general society. Philosophers declared that wives were inferior to their husbands, many putting women closer to the category of slaves. The women were to walk behind their husbands and were generally degraded in other ways. Socrates talked about the foolishness of a man talking with his wife.

To put it simply, by the time of the 1st century, women held little worth! It is recorded that the men would pray in the synagogue, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, King of the Universe, who hast not made me a heathen. Blessed art Thou who hast not made me a bondman. Blessed art thou who hast not made me a woman."

Women in the New Testament Church

Paul says that in Christ all are equal/important. We see then the important role that women played in the early church. In Acts 2:17-18, Peter quotes from the prophet Joel concerning the role of women that was to come: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: and on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophecy."

Examples from the New Testament show the importance of women in the early church. Luke 2:36-38 tells about a woman named Anna who was a prophetess. Acts 21:9 says that Philip had four daughters who prophesied. 1 Corinthians 11 talks about women praying and prophesying.

It seems that the main work of the New Testament prophets was not the foretelling of future events, but rather it was to instruct and comfort the converts. A New Testament prophet was an inspired teacher and exhorter whose purpose it was to reveal God's will. It appears that women were to be actively involved in this kind of church-work in the 1st century.

In Romans 16, Paul mentions the names of 27 people; several of them are women. What is said about these women is important. The first woman mentioned is Phoebe, a servant/minister of the church at Cenchreae. She was obviously one of many women who voluntarily devoted themselves to teaching and helping those who preached. These women would wait on the sick and do all kinds of work in helping the spreading of the gospel. Phoebe was therefore called a minister just as all laborers were appropriately called.

In verse 3 of Romans 16, Paul mentions Priscilla and Aquila as his fellow workers (*sunergos*) in the Lord. This word is used 3 times in the chapter, and each time it is used in reference to those who proclaimed the gospel.

Luke tells more about these two in Acts 18:24-26: "And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquilla and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly."

Little is said about the other women mentioned in Romans chapter 16, but it is evident that Paul had high regard for Christian women. Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis are all said to have labored in the Lord, but the specifics of their work is not known.

In Philippians 4:2-3, Paul refers to two other women who labored with him: "I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord. And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow laborers, whose names are in the book of life."

Many scholars would contend that these women fought side by side with Paul in spreading the gospel. Regardless of the extent of their work, it seems obvious that women in the 1st century were a very important part of the Lord's church.

The New Testament Command for Women to be Silent

We see then that women were very much an important part of the work of the church in the 1st century, and are still to be regarded as vital and much-needed workers for the Lord!

But, even though we understand how important women are in the Lord's service, and even though we see women doing so much in the 1st century, we need to realize that there are still very clear and specific commands regarding the role of women in the church and concerning the nature of their work!

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul commanded, "Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church."

Paul likewise instructs in 1 Timothy 2:11-14, "Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression."

Both passages make it clear:

- women are to be silent within the church
- women are not to take a position of authority over the man
- they are to be in subjection to the man

That means that it would apparently be wrong for a woman:

- to teach a class with adult Christian men present
- to preach before an audience containing men
- to take a leading role such as leading prayer or leading singing with men present
- to have any kind of a leadership role in a congregation where she would be in a position of authority over men

To do any of these things would be to usurp the authority of the man. That does not mean that women cannot sing or speak during a Bible class, but according to Paul's teachings, in no circumstance are they ever to take a dominant position. There are many things that women can do in the work of the church without violating the command to be in subjection to the man:

- teach classes filled with other women
- teach classes for young people
- help in the teaching in Home Bible Studies through Correspondence Courses
- visiting the sick and shut-ins and visiting new members
- going door-to-door inviting people to services and handing out Bible tracts, etc.
- the list goes on and on concerning all the many, many things that women can do in the service of the Lord and still be obedient to the NT command to remain in subjection to the man

But How did Women Prophecy and Still Be in Subjection?

A study on this subject obviously brings about some interesting questions: How could women in the 1st century church be silent and still be doing things like prophesying? Is that not a contradiction to Paul's command to be silent and in subjection to men? How can women be doing all that they're doing and still be obedient to this command to be silent? Was this teaching and preaching being done in the general assembly with men present?

This is actually a subject that has been debated by scholars for years and years. Many have done hours and hours of research on the subject and have written long, long papers on this subject, papers that detail all the various theories of explanation regarding what appears to be a contradiction. And there have been numerous long, detailed lessons on the subject delivered in churches and Bible classes.

But consider please a simple and logical explanation...

Remember that in the 1st century we see the existence of miraculous, spiritual gifts. God chose to use both men and women to proclaim the Gospel message through the use of these gifts. Evidently to be thus guided by God and the Holy Spirit—even as a woman before men--was not in violation of the principle of subordination.

Therefore, if the Holy Spirit thus led even a woman to speak in the assembly of the church, such could not be considered as taking a dominant position over men or usurping the authority of men, because, in such a case, the authority was from God Himself. Women who did so would still be in obedience to the command to be in subjection to men. So the command still holds, whatever women may do, it must be done within the limits of their subordination to man. (Perhaps the wearing of the veil in 1 Corinthians 11:5 was necessary to still show submission.)

What about Deborah?

Judges 4-5 tells about a woman named Deborah who came to be a judge over Israel at the time they were being severely oppressed by Jabin king of Canaan. Some have suggested that this instance of a woman in position of authority contradicts that of the NT teaching on the submissive role of women. Others would suggest that Deborah is the exception that proves the rule. Regardless, it is believed there is no such contradiction for the following reasons:

- An element of OT law and practice has no bearing whatsoever on the teachings and requirements of the new covenant. While the old naturally leads to the new (as taught in Galatians 3:24), there are clear distinctions between the two. Numerous practices and commands in the OT are replaced by other practices and commands in the NT (system of priests, manner of worship, sacrifices, etc.).
- As Deborah was a prophetess, she would be in a similar situation to those women prophetesses of the NT who did not usurp the authority of men because they were led directly by the Holy Spirit. Such was the case with Deborah—she was immediately inspired by God Himself in all her instructions. In v6, she says to Barak, “Behold, the Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded...”
- It is conjectured that Deborah was chosen because she, being a woman, would be more easily (and thus foolishly) permitted by Jabin to carry out the actions that led to his destruction.

- More likely, it appears Deborah may have been chosen because God wanted to use a woman to convey a message of His divine power. Deborah declared in v9, “The Lord will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman.” Then, in v21, God used a woman to kill Sisera. But notice that v23 states: “So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the sons of Israel.” The victory was of divine origin, not human. The world, in ascribing victory to a woman, would perhaps also have need to acknowledge the awesome power of God.

Does the Command to be Silent Still Apply Today?

There is one other question to consider on this subject: Does this command still apply to women today? Or was this merely a cultural command no longer applicable today?

There are some that believe that the Biblical teaching concerning women is based solely on the cultural situation at that time. In other words, some believe the command to be silent and in submission was given in the 1st century only because of the social situation regarding women, because women were regarded as inferior. Those who argue such would therefore say that the teaching of silence would not apply to women in our culture today, since generally women are regarded much more highly now than they were in the 1st century.

It is true that it would be appropriate for Paul to command what he did in light of the cultural situation of his day. If women were, in fact, viewed as inferior by most people, even if Christians understood equality, it would be difficult to win outsiders if they saw women acting contrary to social tradition. It is reasonable, then, that women did need to keep silent for that reason.

Nevertheless, the command for women to be in subjection to man was not apparently just a command for the cultural situation of the 1st century. It seems clearly to be a command for all time because of what we find in 1 Timothy chapter 2. Notice that in that passage Paul's teaching is actually based on Old Testament teaching concerning the woman's relationship to man as found in the story of creation and the fall of man. He said that women were not to usurp the authority of the men because (1) Adam was first formed and because (2) Eve was first deceived.

This is important: Paul was basing his teaching on eternal things, not things of a temporary and cultural nature. Therefore, even though the cultural point is somewhat relevant, we must conclude that the principle as spoken here by Paul is intended to be permanent and still applies to the church today.

A further comment needs to be made concerning miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. Such miraculous gifts were necessary during the early days of the church. They were not blessed with a written New Testament as we are today. They needed some extra help during the infancy of the church, but such gifts are no longer needed or in existence today. Neither men nor women today are miraculously led to prophesy as they were in the 1st century. (See lesson on Speaking in Tongues for more information on the end of miraculous gifts of the Spirit.)

Ephesians 5:22

Ephesians 5:22-24 says, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.”

Some not only contend that Paul's command for women to be in subjection was only for the culture of his time, but they also contend that his command for wives to be in subjection to their husbands was only for those in Ephesus and was also relevant only to the culture at that time. If so, consider the following:

- Is this then also true for Paul's statement about Christ and the church?
- Was Christ the head of the church only for that culture at that time?
- Verse 24 clearly links the church being subject to Christ to wives being subject to their husbands. Are we no longer subject to Christ?

Ephesians 5:25 says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” Is this command to husbands also only to those in Ephesus and applicable only to the culture of that time?

Conclusion

Remember Galatians 3:28... There Paul made it clear that women are every bit as important as men, so later when he talks about subjection, he does not mean that women are inferior. He is simply stating that it is God's will that men be responsible for the leadership and the public service of the church, and that women are to be in quiet subjection to the men.

Not inferior, just a different role. A woman is still to be active/working/doing all she can, but she is not to do anything that puts her above the authority of the man.