

“Let The Women Keep Silent In The Churches”

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For centuries, questions and controversies have existed among religious people over the role of women in the work and worship of the local church. Two extreme positions have arisen:

1. Some have concluded that the Bible authorizes women to *preach* and hold positions of authority within the local church. I am regularly asked what I believe about “*women preachers.*” History reveals that the women-preacher movement is closely connected to the overall and more secular *women’s liberation movement.*
2. To the opposite extreme, some have concluded that the Bible doesn’t authorize women to speak at all in church assemblies, even going so far as to prohibit women from participating in *singing.*

These extreme positions result from people either completely *rejecting* the plain commands of Scripture, or from a failure to consider their context.

There are others who do not hold either of these extreme positions, but they still have honest questions about the nature and extent of the limitations that are placed upon women. For example, is it always wrong for a woman to *teach or correct* a man? Do women violate Bible teaching by answering questions in a *Bible class*? May a woman answer a public question about an absent member? God has spoken to these things, both explicitly and implicitly. We will need to examine the related commands, statements, examples and implications in order to obtain a clear understanding.

Our title is taken from 1 Corinthians 14:34, where Paul said,

“The women should keep silent in the churches: for they are not permitted to speak; but should be in submission, as the Law also says.” Paul continues, *“If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”* (1 Cor. 14:35)

The prohibition is a simple, straightforward, positive divine command. When considered in its context, and alongside the related teaching in 1 Timothy 2:12, we will see that God is not demanding that women be silent in all worship activities, but that He requires women to be in submission to men. 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 says, *"Let a woman learn in quietness with all subjection. {12} But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness."* The word "quietness" is from a different Greek word (*hesuchia*) than the word "silent" (*sigao*). While the specific context of 1 Corinthians 14:34 requires "silence," the context of 1 Timothy 2:12 requires "quietness." The word translated "quietness" in 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 was also used earlier in the chapter (v. 2) to denote orderliness ("peaceable and *quiet* lives"). The word is used in 1 Peter 3:4 to denote an attitude of meekness.

Was Paul "A Male Chauvinist?"

Paul's prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12 are devastating to the doctrine of women preachers and church leaders. Though we need to look more deeply at these texts in order to appreciate their implications, a mere casual reading of these texts will suffice to show the fallacy of the woman-preacher doctrine. Since the passages are just too plain for people to merely explain them away, some are attempting to dismiss them entirely by discrediting their author. In an effort to marginalize Paul's teaching on this subject, some have charged the apostle Paul with being *chauvinistic*. They accuse Paul of being biased against women, and opposed to their taking leadership roles in spiritual matters. Their allegation is both baseless and blasphemous. They fail to consider that their charge does more than indict Paul on just this one point: It denies his very apostleship and rejects his inspiration. If Paul's writings are fallible on this subject, then why wouldn't they be equally fallible on other subjects? This is a slippery slope. If Paul is wrong in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12, where else might he be wrong? The argument is specious, and it is fraught with dangerous implications.

Interestingly, just three verses later in 1 Corinthians 14, is where Paul affirms, *"If anyone thinks he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are the commandments of the Lord."* So much for Paul's alleged "male

chauvinism!" By rejecting Paul's teaching about women preachers one rejects "*the commandments of the Lord!*" Anyone who rejects Paul's teaching on the submission of women in public worship may as well also reject his teaching on worship itself. The same Spirit that inspired Paul to say the one thing inspired him to also say the other.

Paul Did Not Prohibit *All Teaching By Women*

Luke records that while in Caesarea, Paul stayed with "*Philip, the evangelist.*" We are told that Philip had 4 daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8, 9). Paul makes no rebuke of their actions. Obviously, these women prophesied in a context consistent with the restrictions cited in 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14. Furthermore, it was Paul who taught that the older women should teach the younger women concerning their duties to home and family (Tit. 2:3, 4). In Romans 16:3 Paul commended Priscilla and Aquila as people who had "risked their lives" for his own life. This is noteworthy, for this woman and man were responsible for correcting Apollos' misconception about baptism (Acts 18:26). The female, Priscilla, was obviously involved in providing instruction to Apollos, yet Paul made no rebuke of her actions. In fact, the mention of Priscilla's name *before* that of her husband would suggest that she may have been better informed than he was, and may have initiated and led the discussion in correcting Apollos (see also this order in Rom. 16:3 and 2 Tim. 4:19). It is certainly unusual for the female to be named ahead of the male. Considering 1 Timothy 2:12, we must conclude that Priscilla's demeanor was one of meekness and "quietness." She taught a man, but she did so with an attitude of respect for his position as a man.

In a related point: Paul identified the woman *Phoebe* as a servant of the church in Cenchreae. He commended her for providing assistance to him and others (Romans 16:1, 2). He elsewhere cites the women, *Euodia* and *Syntyche* as laboring "side by side" with him in the gospel. We are not told their exact deeds, but we do know, based upon the principle of Scripture continuity (Jn. 10:35), that they did not preach to men or supplant their authority in any way.

Analysis Of Passages

Though there are some similarities between 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12, there are also certain differences that need to be

considered, and which will help us to better understand both passages.

1 Corinthians 14 addresses the exercise of spiritual gifts in the worship *assembly* of the local *church* (1 Cor. 14:23, 26). Paul speaks of *teaching, singing and prayer* that were done "in the church(es)" (vs. 19, 28, 33, 34). The word "silent" is used 3 times in this connection (28, 30, 34). It is sometimes applied to men and sometimes to women. Certain rules of *orderliness* are given in verses 27-35 with respect to public teaching. Simply following this context leads us to certain conclusions about the silence of women in the public assembly. Verses 34 and 35 should not be divorced from their immediate context:

1. Those empowered by the Spirit to speak in other languages were to do so *sequentially*, not *simultaneously* (v. 27).
2. Tongue-speakers were to be limited to 2-3 per assembly (v. 27).
3. Tongue-speakers were to be "silent" if no interpreter was present (v. 28). *This word "silent" is from the same Greek word that is later used in verse 34 of the women.*
4. Those empowered by the Spirit to prophesy were to do so *sequentially*, not *simultaneously* (v. 31).
5. Prophets were to be limited to 2-3 per assembly (v. 29).
6. Other prophets were to "keep silent" while one prophet was speaking (v. 30). *This word "silent" is from the same Greek word that is later used in verse 34 of women.*
7. God designed both man and spiritual gifts in such a way that man could retain the message that he was given, so that it could be later delivered in an orderly and edifying fashion (vs. 32, 33, 26, 40).
8. Women were not to be involved in this particular teaching process of the church assembly (v. 34). In this environment, and with respect to these functions, they were to be "silent." This injunction emphatically forbids the modern practice of women preachers. The Law of Moses also contained this principle of female submission (Gen. 3:16; Num. 30:3-16), though as we shall see later, in the case of Deborah, this principle did not forbid *all* public leadership by women.

9. Women were not permitted to interrupt the men who were teaching, or publicly insert themselves into related discussions (v. 35). Instead, they were to ask their husbands at home. For those who are quick to ask about what unmarried women are to do in this situation, the *married state* is the ordinary and common state. The general rule is given based upon this fact. Thus we must look to biblical *principles* from this, and other passages in order to answer this question. Such principles would suggest that unmarried women and widows may privately present their questions to elders, preachers, or other men of the church if they wish to inquire more fully on some point.

10. Though 1 Corinthians 14 addresses the exercise of spiritual gifts such as tongue-speaking, prophecy, and Spirit-guided prayers and songs, their purpose was for the *edification, encouragement and consolation* of the brethren (v. 3). Due to the success of the Spirit's mission, we today have access to the completed revelation – the Bible (1 Cor. 13:8-10). We have the complete volume of what was “fully” given by the Spirit in parts and pieces in various times and in various ways (Heb. 1:1; 1 Cor. 13:11, 12). Today, we use that completed revelation (the Scriptures) to provide the same *edification, encouragement and consolation* that was provided in the first century by means of miraculous gifts. Thus, the conduct and worship principles of 1 Corinthians 14 are just as applicable today as they were in the first century.

1 Corinthians 14:34 prohibits women from preaching and teaching over men in church assemblies. **Specifically, the kind of teaching in which one person speaks and all others listen (1 Cor. 14:29).** I emphasize the point of this passage because it provides a contextual definition of the kind of action that is being discussed in verses 26-35. Many people miss this point, and consequently reach faulty conclusions about a woman's rights in the public assembly. For example, *singing* involves *teaching* (Col. 3:16). This leads some to either dismiss the “silence” injunction entirely, or conclude that women are forbidden to participate in church singing. Both conclusions are faulty. Women may sing in church assemblies, for singing involves simultaneous speaking “to one another” (Eph. 5:19). There is equality of action. She teaches, but she teaches *alongside*

men, not “over” them. The only way that a woman could violate submission laws by singing would be for her to actually *lead* the singing. This brings us to 1 Timothy 2:12.

1 Timothy 2:11 & 12 forbids women to “teach” or to exercise authority “over” men. She is, rather, to “*be in quietness.*” As noted above, a different Greek word is used, because a different context and scenario is addressed. In this particular scenario the woman is to be in “quietness,” not in absolute “silence.” Outside the worship assembly, a woman may teach a man, but she must do so with an attitude of meekness, not in a belligerent or belittling way.

Much discussion has revolved around the question of whether or not 1 Timothy 2:12 is an “assembly” passage. The language of this context certainly *does not exclude* the worship assembly. However, it also shows that these restrictions upon women are related to the acts of *learning* (v. 11) and *teaching* (v. 12) with respect to spirituality and godliness. Paul had just instructed women to not dress in such a way so as to draw attention to their physical bodies, but to dress “*with good works, appropriate for women professing to worship God*” (or, *professing godliness*, KJV, 1 Tim. 2:9, 10). This passage does not legislate against a woman lecturing an audience of men on math, science or history, or holding political office, for these things do not fall within the scope of the things described by Paul. Let us recall that the woman *Deborah* was a *judge* in Israel (Judges 4, 5). As such, she was divinely appointed to *lead* Israel and to arbitrate differences among the Jewish people. Deborah was called “the mother of Israel.” It is noteworthy that when Barak refused Deborah’s instructions to go into battle unless she accompanied him, Deborah told him that as a result, the honor of the battle (the victory) would be given to a woman. We later learn that *Jael*, Heber’s wife, killed Sisera by using a workman’s hammer to drive a tent peg through his temple. Not contradicting or defying Deborah’s role, **1 Timothy 2:12 legislates against a woman lecturing or leading men with respect to moral and spiritual matters.**

The fact that 1 Timothy 2:12 does not legislate in regard to social and political matters is upheld by Paul’s subsequent argument that “*Adam was not beguiled, but the woman being beguiled fell into transgression*” (v. 14). Transgression (sin) is the violation of God’s

law (1 Jn. 3:4). God's law defines sin (Rom. 7:7). By citing Eve's transgression, Paul draws attention to her carelessness with respect to the implementation of God's law when dealing with Satan. Though the regulations of this passage are not limited to the local church, we can say that they are limited to the moral and spiritual realm.

What About Women Speaking In A Bible Class?

The "silence" order of 1 Corinthians 14:34 is clearly applied to the worship assembly. Paul describes activities that are carried out when the church has "*come together into one place*" (vs. 23, 26). This does not describe a *Bible class* situation. Furthermore, as demonstrated above, women do speak, even in a *worship* assembly, when they participate in *singing*. In the same way that the "silence" prohibition does not apply to the act of singing, neither does it apply in a Bible class situation. It is the "quietness" rule of 1 Timothy 2:12 that applies in these situations. The woman is not to teach or exercise authority over the man. This means:

1. That a woman is permitted *to answer a Bible question* that is asked by a male teacher, for the teacher has oversight of the class.
2. That a woman is permitted *to speak in a Bible class* provided that her attitude is one of "quietness" (meekness and gentleness). She is not permitted to engage in loud, combative or argumentative language. Observations can be made without a spirit of loud and dominant assertiveness.
3. That a woman may not attempt to "take over" or direct a class by the nature, content and character of her comments. She is to "learn in quietness," which means that she does so in a context of non-assertiveness.
4. That a woman should not speak in a class if she lacks control of her own spirit and is likely to speak contentiously. A strong will can be a tremendous quality, but women must be careful in how they present themselves.
5. I will take this opportunity to relate this principle to the question of a woman answering an announcer's question about the condition of an absent member. The (male) announcer is in

the leadership role. His authority is in no way usurped by a woman answering his question.

There is a difference between a Bible class and a worship assembly. The "exhortation" (preaching) that is done in a worship assembly is to be done "with all authority" (Titus 2:15). Though women may teach men (Col. 3:16; Acts 18:26), they are not to teach or exercise "authority" over men (1 Tim. 2:12). This implies a substantive difference between the "preaching" that is done in the worship assembly (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 14:27-35) and the "teaching" that is done in singing or in a Bible class.

Conclusion

The Bible gives several reasons why women are to be in submission to men: "*The man is not of the woman, but the woman is of the man*" (1 Cor. 11:8). "*The man was not created for the woman, but the woman for the man*" (1 Cor. 11:9). "*Adam was first formed, then Eve*" (1 Tim. 2:13). "*Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor*" (1 Tim. 2:14). Those who respect the Bible as God's infallible word will simply accept these reasons on the mere basis that *God gave them*. They will not resort to the so-called *enlightened* reasoning of the women's liberation movement. Incidentally, the Bible nowhere denies the right of equal pay for equal work. Nor does it deny the right of women to be treated *respectfully* by men. In fact, the Bible is the book that best presents the idea that women should be respected, appreciated, loved, honored and cherished by men (Eph. 5:29; 1 Pet. 3:7).

While the Bible forbids women to *preach* to men, it does grant their right to teach children, other women, and even *men* in the appropriate context (Titus 2:3, 4; Eph. 6:4; 1 Tim. 5:14; Col. 3:16; Acts 18:26). Order is maintained (1 Cor. 14:40), and confusion is avoided (1 Cor. 14:33) when these regulations are respected by all.

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