

WHAT DOES GOD THINK ABOUT WOMEN PREACHERS?

BY PERRY STONE



One of the two passages used to teach that a woman must never speak in a public church setting is penned in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35:

“Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.”

The second verse used in connection with the above verse is 1 Timothy 2:11-12:

“Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.”

The book of Acts is the earliest record of the actions of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the Apostles and the first generation Christian converts. Peter at Pentecost, quoting Joel, announced that sons and daughters would prophesy. Many years later in Acts 21:9, we read that Phillip had four daughters that “did prophesy.” In the epistles, we read that God used husband and wife couples in the church to assist in organizing churches in their homes, and the husband and wife team are both listed as working together, teaching and instructing. One such couple was Priscilla and Aquila, a dynamic couple who assisted Apollos in understanding the Holy Spirit (Acts 18:24-28). In the Scripture it reads, “They took him and expounded to him the way more perfectly”—*they* meaning Aquila and his wife (Acts 18:26). This couple formed a church in their house (Rom. 16:3-5). Paul, in Romans 16:1, listed a woman named Phoebe as a “servant and helper of many.”

When ministers publicly state that Paul forbade any women to speak in the church, they will have difficulty explaining another instruction that Paul gave in 1 Corinthians 11:5:

“But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved.”

In this reference, Paul acknowledges that women both prayed and prophesied in the church. Is this a clear contradiction, that a woman should *never speak in a church* and yet they are permitted to *pray and prophecy* in the church?

Going back to the “let the woman keep silence,” passage, Paul followed this injunction with these words, “If they learn anything, let them ask their husband at home.” This is actually the second half of the verse that explains the admonition to keep silent. In the Jewish culture, at the Temple there was a court of the women where the women were permitted to watch the procedures of the Temple, and there was also a Gentile partition restricting Gentiles from entering past a certain point. In the Jewish synagogues, men sat on the main floor and the women were permitted in the balconies. Today in Israel at the Western Wall, the men pray on the left and the women pray on the right, with a stone wall separating the two. Thus in the Jewish culture, the man and woman sit separately.

Many scholars believe that the passage on women keeping silence was not related to praying or prophesying, but was written to prevent a disruptive occurrence. When a speaker was speaking with the women sitting in a separate area from their husbands, they would disrupt the service by asking their husbands for further explanations. Paul instructed the women

to learn from their husband when they were at home, to prevent public disruption and confusion.

Greek scholars point out that, in that culture, the men attended the synagogues and were educated, while the women had children and performed the tasks of being a wife and mother. Thus the educated men taught their wives in private. Paul is not dealing with the subject of women preachers, but of discipline during a religious service (*source: Light from the Greek New Testament, by Boyce Blackwater, M.A., Th.D., The Warner Press*).

The theme of Paul's admonition is women *speaking* in the church. There are two important words for *speak* and *speaking* that must be understood in relation to a woman not "speaking" in the church. They are the Greek verbs *laleo* and *lego*. The word *laleo* refers to the ability or use of the organs of speech; giving a sound, utterance or expressing words with your voice. *Lego* means to speak, in the sense of declaring an intelligible message. According to Greek scholars, *laleo* emphasizes the outward form of speech, while *lego* refers to the substance and meaning of what has been spoken. In brief, *laleo* refers to the act of speaking, while *lego* declares what the speaker actually says (*source: Light from the Greek New Testament, by Boyce Blackwater, M.A., Th.D., The Warner Press; Anderson, IN., 1956; 56-57*).

The Greek word *laleo* is also used of the sounds made by birds, insects, bees, and even the sound of a trumpet (Rev. 4:1), the sound of thunder (Rev. 10:3-4), the voice of the dragon speaking (Rev. 13:11), and the speaking voice given to the image of the beast (Rev. 13:15). The word was also used by Greeks when infants would jabber before they could actually articulate words. The root of the word *laleo* is *lal*, illustrating the effort of a child to make its first sounds, la, la, la.

To understand the context of a woman keeping silent, Paul does not use the word for a woman speaking intelligent words or speech, but the word for making sounds. He was saying they should not be la la-ing around in the church. It was about disturbing the service and not about teaching and instructing with an intelligent sound and voice. Obviously, women were permitted to pray and prophesy and were active in ministry.

In 1 Timothy 2:11-12, the women were not to *usurp* authority over a man. The Greek word *usurp* is *authenteo* and means to act upon your own, or to dominate over. Look at the word "silence." In 1 Corinthians 14:28, Paul said that if a person speaks out loud in tongues in a church service and no one interprets, then they are to keep silence. This Greek word is *saigao*, and means to *hold your peace and say nothing else*. It is used when the multitude kept silent while Paul and Barnabas were speaking (Acts 15:12) and when Paul gave a speech before

a group of men (Acts 21:40).

In 1 Timothy, Paul said for the women to keep silent and he used this word—to say nothing—as they were disturbing the speaker by interrupting. As the minister spoke, they were to listen and not ask at that time for explanations.

A great example of this occurs today on the mission fields. In the large outdoor meetings where numerous unbelievers are attending, it is common while the speaker is speaking for men and woman in attendance to begin talking out loud, either to counter a statement made by the speaker, or to begin asking questions of others sitting near them. My missionary friends, who minister in nations such as India, have witnessed this first hand. Because they are speaking and using a public address system, they are not disturbed by this activity, as much as when it occurs in a small rural area where hundreds are packing out a small building. This type of interruption of the speaker by individuals in the congregation was what many scholars believe Paul was addressing, especially in his letter to the Corinthians.

However, in 1 Timothy 2:11, where women are told to learn in silence, the Greek word *silence* here is different than in 1 Corinthians 14:28. This Greek word, *hesuchia*, is a word that speaks of being still and in quietness, or figuratively, away from the bustle and the noise. Paul is saying, let them be at peace and not attempt to rise up against the spiritual authority of the men in the church. If men were teaching, then women were to be subject to the male teachers, and not rise up and challenge their authority.

When a person reads 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11 without researching the textual and historical context, it would seem that Paul was very much against women saying or doing anything in a church setting. However, the Greek words, the context, and the cultural traditions of the day have a bearing upon understanding the intent of Paul's instructions. Paul was blessed to have many co-laborers, including numerous women who assisted him in ministry. We read:

"I implore Euodias and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life" (Phil. 4:2-3).

Consider also the numerous women linked with Christ's ministry. When Mary presented the infant Christ at the Temple, a female prophetess named Anna saw the Christ child and gave a wonderful prophecy under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:36-38). One man suggested that Anna was living under the Old Covenant and not during the "church age," where God demanded silence from the women. How

strange is that? A woman could prophesy for 4,000 years but after Pentecost and the birth of the church, God only used men and made the women sit down?

Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and Isaiah's wife (Isa. 8:3) were all specifically called prophetesses in the Old Testament. Phillip had four virgin daughters who operated in the prophetic gift (Acts 21:9) under the New Covenant.

The evidence is that God permits men and women to participate in His spiritual charismata. In Luke 8:1-2, several wealthy women ministered to Christ of their substance:

“And the twelve were with Him, and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities—Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance.” – Luke 8:1-3

If we move from the ministry of Christ to the time of His sufferings, all of His chosen eleven disciples fled the scene except the Apostle John (John 20). However, dedicated women were present, including Mary the mother of Christ, who was given into the care of the Apostle John. When the other ten disciples were hiding behind locked doors and windows for fear of their lives, it was two women with the same name “Mary” who journeyed to the tomb around sunrise to anoint Christ's body (Matt. 28:1).

After Christ's ascension to heaven, there were women, including Mary the mother of Christ, present during the early meetings in Jerusalem prior to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). While the men ran away, the women remained and became the first to announce the good news that Christ was resurrected (Matt. 28:7). Today, they would be termed an “evangelist,” or one who bring good news.

THE DEACONESS

Most churches are familiar with male deacons, but few know about female deaconesses. The earliest Biblical mention of a female deaconess was when Paul wrote in Romans 16:1, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is the servant of the church at Cenchrea.” The Greek word *servant* is not the normal Greek word *doulos*, used in the New Testament for a slave or servant, but is the Greek word *diakonos*, which is an attendant in ministry, one who assists, or is a teacher or pastor.

When the Christian church split between the West (Catholic) and the East (Byzantine, later termed Orthodox), the Eastern Church permitted women to serve in the position of a deaconess. A deaconess was a female who served to help in the work of the ministry. The ministry of a deaconess was mentioned by the early fathers Clement of Alexandria and Origen (*Source: Commentary of 1 Corinthians 9:5, Stromata 3,*

6, 53. 3-4; Commentary on Romans 10:17; Migne PG XIV col. 1278 A-C).

The deaconess was generally a widow who had only once been married, although sometimes the position was filled by virgins. Their ministry functions included certain pastoral duties, including baptizing the women converts in the congregation, caring for those who were imprisoned, and assisting in comforting the persecuted. The deaconess also assisted the women who had given birth to children and visited with members of their own sex. (*source: A Concise History of the Christian Church, by Charles k. True D.D.; New York Nelson and Phillips; 1834; page 26*)

In Syria in the third century, a document called Didascalia of the Apostles expressed that the bishop, “appoint a woman for the ministry of women. For there are homes in which you cannot send a male deacon to their women, on the account of the heathen, but you may send a deaconess...and there are many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required...” In the fifth century, the Apostolic Constitutions recorded a bishop laying hands upon the women and calling down the Holy Spirit for the ministry of the diaconate (*Source: Apostolic Constitutions VII, 19-20; F. X. Funk. Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum, Paderborn 1906, 1:530*).

No one would read the New Testament and deny that the women were actively involved in ministry and support of the church. However, the issue has been the woman who teaches or is a pastor of a congregation. One of the significant changes that occurred under the New Covenant when the Gentiles were grafted into the Abrahamic blessing was the change in how God viewed both men and women in the Body of Christ. The Jewish tradition was that women were less significant than men and had no spiritual authority except a few rare instances where the Spirit of God moved upon them (as the case of Deborah in Judges 4 -5).

A significant passage that gives the best summary of men and women, and Jews and Gentiles in the Body of Christ is in Galatians 3:28-29:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.” – Galatians 3:28-29

Under the New Covenant, the blood of Christ makes all believers one in faith and one family of God. There are no gender or ethnic divisions, and all men and women are formed in God's image. The covenant gives each access to the fullness of God's spiritual blessings. ■

* You can read more about this topic in Perry's new book, *The Code of the Holy Spirit*.