

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH: NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS

I. *Women were prominent in many activities in the early church.*

A. Prophecy. Acts 2:17-18 claims the fulfillment of Joel 2:28-29, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." Acts 21:9 mentions the four virgin daughters of Philip who had the gift of prophecy. 1 Corinthians 11:5 gives the regulation, "Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head."

B. Teaching. Acts 18:26, "When Priscilla and Aquila heard him [Apollos], they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately." Titus 2:3-5 instructs, "Tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women."

C. Advancing the gospel. The details of this work are left unspecified, but the terminology is the same as used for men who were co-workers of the apostles and evangelists. Philippians 4:3 requests, "I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women [Euodia and Syntyche], for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers." This activity included missionary work. In Romans 16:7, Andronicus and Junia, who were "prominent among the apostles," were likely a husband and wife missionary team. The phrase does not mean "well known by the apostles" but "notable among the apostles," and Junia is almost certainly a feminine name. "Apostles" is used in the sense of "missionaries" (as in

Acts 14:4, 14; 2 Cor. 11:5, 13).

D. Working on behalf of the church, again in unspecified ways. Romans 16:6, "Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you." Romans 16:12, "Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa" (women's names).

E. Hosting the church in their homes. The wealthy Lydia provided the meeting place at the beginning of the church in Philippi, according to Acts 16:15 and 40: "When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' . . . After leaving the prison, [Paul and Silas] went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed." The many benefactions of Phoebe (Rom. 16:2) may have included providing her home as a place of hospitality for missionaries and place of meeting for the church.

F. Serving in various specified capacities. During Jesus' ministry women provided financial support for him and the disciples. Luke 8:1-3, refers to women "who provided for them out of their resources." After the church began, Acts 9:36 refers to Dorcas, who "was devoted to good works and acts of charity," including making clothing for widows (vs. 39).

G. Serving as Deacons? Romans 16:1-2 says of Phoebe, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [diakonos, deacon] of the church at Cenchreae, . . . for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well." 1 Timothy 3:11, "Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things."

H. Being Enrolled as Widows. 1 Timothy 5:3-16 identifies three kinds of worthy widows: those supported by their family (5:4, 8, 16), those supported by the charity of the church (5:3, 5, 16), and those who were enrolled by the church and engaged in ministries of service on its behalf (5:9-12).

II. *Women did the things commanded of each Christian in the assembly.* These activities would include: (1) Singing--Ephesians 5:18-20, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs [to one another], singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"; (2) Saying the congregational "Amen" accompanying prayer--1 Corinthians 14:16, "How can anyone in the position of an outsider say the 'Amen' to your thanksgiving?";

(3) Giving--1 Corinthians 16:2, "On the first day of every week, *each of you* is to put aside and place in the treasury whatever is in keeping with your prosperity, so that collections need not be taken when I come."

III. *Limitations were placed on women in certain activities.*

A. Bishops/Elders/Pastors were male. 1 Timothy 3:1-7, "A bishop must be . . . the husband of one wife, . . . managing his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way"

Titus 1:5-9, "Appoint elders [masculine] in every town, . . . if anyone is . . . the husband of one wife, having faithful children."

B. Individual, representative, and authoritative speaking was forbidden.

1 Timothy 2:1-15.

a. Reasons for taking the passage as applying to the assembly and not other occasions: (1) The "instructions" (1 Tim. 1:18) given to Timothy are regulations for conduct "in the church of God" (1 Tim. 3:15). They are similar to the "church order" literature.

(2) The formal description of types of prayers--"supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings" for "every person" (1 Tim. 2:1) so that "we" (Christians) might be at peace (1 Tim. 3:2) implies a public gathering.

(3) The men "lifting holy hands" and the women not dressing ostentatiously (1 Tim. 2:8-9) suggest a public occasion but not necessarily so.

(4) The words about women learning but not teaching (1 Tim. 2:11-12) were not applicable to a home or private setting (Titus 2:3-4).

(5) "In every place" (1 Tim. 2:8) had a technical usage for every place of assembly or every place of worship (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 2:14; 1 Thess. 1:8).

b. "I desire . . . the men [males] should pray" (1 Tim. 2:8), that is lead in prayer, and "the women should dress themselves modestly" (1 Tim. 3:9).

c. Women are forbidden "to teach or have authority over a man" (1 Tim. 2:12) in the assembled church. The construction normally forbids two parallel activities; where the second phrase

is not parallel to the first, it explains its significance or gives the basis for it (cf. 6:16) and does not qualify or modify it.

d. The instructions are based on the created order--1 Tim. 2:13, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve" (Gen. 2:21-23); and 1 Tim. 2:14, "But the woman was deceived [first] and became a transgressor" (Gen. 3:12-13).

e. Women have a function that men do not have--1 Tim. 3:15, "She will be saved through childbearing"; so perhaps men are given a function of their own.

f. The instructions have a universal character:

(1) The nouns "woman" and "man" without the article in 1 Tim. 2:9, 11, 12 are generic, a usage appropriate to a general rule and not referring specifically to wives and husbands.

(2) The language throughout indicates this broad scope: prayer for all people (2:1), "every place" (2:8), the formulation of a general rule (2:11-12), the appeal to origins (2:13-14), the nature of women (2:15).

1 Corinthians 14:27-40

a. Structure of 1 Corinthians 14:27-36

[Name the group] If anyone speaks in a **tongue**

[State the rule about speech] let there be only two or at most
three,

and each in turn;

and let one interpret.

[Explain special circumstances] But if there is no one to
interpret,

let them be silent in church

[Justify the rule] and speak to themselves and to God.

[Name the group] Let **prophets**

[State the rule about speech] speak two or three,

and let the others [prophets ?] weigh what is said.

[Explain special circumstances] If a revelation is made to
someone else sitting nearby,

let the first person be silent.

You can all prophesy

one by one

so that all may learn and all be encouraged.

[Justify the rule] And the spirits of prophets are subject to the
prophets,

for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

[Name the group] Let the **women**

[State the rule about speech] be silent in the churches.

For they are not permitted to speak,

but should be subordinate,

as the law also says.

[Explain special circumstances] If there is anything they
desire to know,

let them ask their husbands [men] at home.

[Justify the rule] For it is shameful for a woman to speak in
church.

b. What the chart shows: (1) All this passage is part

of the same unit, so the words about women, as having the same pattern, are not misplaced and are not an interpolation.

(2) "Speak" and "Be silent" mean the same for women as for tongue speakers and prophets.

(3) Paul regulates the speech of two groups and forbids that of the other group.

c. No known manuscript or other witness to the text lacks verses 34-35.

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d. Paul's arguments against women speaking in the assembly: (1) The practice of the churches--1 Cor. 14:33, "As in all the churches of the saints."

(2) What the law says--1 Cor. 14:34, "They should be submissive, as the law also says" [Gen. 3:16 or 2:22].

(3) A matter of shame--1 Cor. 14:35, "For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."

(4) The command of the Lord--1 Cor. 14:37, "Anyone . . . must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord."

e. Indications of a general rule: (1) The impersonal statement, "It is not permitted for them to speak" (vs. 34) indicates a general principle.

(2) The absence of an object for "subordinate" or "in subjection" (v. 34) and the absence of the article with "woman" (v. 35) serve to generalize the statements.

f. Scope of the limitation: (1) Speaking in a tongue

was prayer language addressed to God (1 Cor. 14:2) and prophesy was delivering a revelation from God to human beings (1 Cor. 14:6, 30) or speaking for "edification, encouragement, and consolation" (1 Cor. 14:3), so at a minimum the context forbids women leading in prayer and preaching.

(2) To have a gift did not guarantee the right to exercise it in church, as is shown by the limitation or prohibition placed on the gift of speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 12:10-11) in church (1 Cor. 14:18-19, 27-28).

(3) "Let them be in submission" or "let them subject themselves" (which would be better renderings than "subordinate"--1 Cor. 14:34), shows that the speaking would indicate a lack of submission and so suggests that the speaking has to do with individual authoritative and representative public speaking roles.

(4) Paul extends the prohibition to the seemingly most innocent and justifiable kind of speaking, by saying that if they do indeed want to learn, they have another venue in which to do so (1 Cor. 14:35). Every woman in Greek and Roman society had a "lord" as a legal representative. Her "man" here might be her husband, father, brother, or uncle.

IV. *Women's attire* is regulated--1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

A. The divine order of leadership: 1 Corinthians 11:3, "Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ."

B. This arrangement established at creation is intended to promote mutuality.

1. 1 Corinthians 11:8-9, "Man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man." 1 Corinthians 11:11-12, "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God."

2. Hence, Paul bases his instructions about women on Genesis 2 (creation), not Genesis 3 (the fall).

C. On these theological and anthropological premises Paul affirms that the distinction of the sexes is to be shown in their attire and appearance. 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, "Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head." 1 Corinthians 11:7, "For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man."

D. The distinction of the sexes is based on creation; how that distinction is expressed in a given situation is influenced by cultural norms. Unlike the mostly theological arguments in 1 Corinthians 14, the arguments for the veil are cultural:

(1) Honor or shame for the husband (1 Cor. 11:4-5).

(2) Disgrace to the woman--1 Cor. 11:5b-6, "[To be unveiled in worship] is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil."

(3) What is accepted as a sign of authority--1 Cor.

11:10, "A woman ought to have [a symbol of] authority on her head." (Angels are perhaps invoked as witnesses to the order of creation.)

(4) What is regarded by human beings as natural--1 Cor. 11:13-15, "Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? Does not nature [custom] itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering."

(5) The custom of the churches--1 Cor. 11:16, "But if anyone is disposed to be contentious--we have no such custom [habit], nor do the churches of God."

E. Is there a contradiction between 1 Corinthians 11:5 and 14:34-35?

1. Two approaches: a. 1 Corinthians 11:5 may not be an assembly of the church. It may be a smaller group of the church. Acts 21:8-12 is an instance of a prophet addressing a group that is not a church meeting.

b. Paul may address one problem at a time: the veil in 1 Corinthians 11 and women speaking in chapter 14. Compare his strategy in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 on food sacrificed to idols: initially accepting the premises of the Corinthians that idols are nothing and so there is liberty to eat sacrificial meat but arguing on the ground of the effect on others against the practice (8:1-13), and then giving detailed regulations on the circumstances in which sacrificial meat may be eaten and not eaten, including its prohibition in the actual worship of idols

(10:14-33). Failure to observe this pattern of argument could lead to the conclusion that there is a contradiction between 1 Cor. 8:4, 7 and 10:14, 20-21, even as some see a contradiction between 11:5 and 14:34.

2. Paul can mention something of which he disapproves without correcting it immediately (cf. 1 Cor. 15:29).

3. It is strange to take a statement made in discussing one subject (head covering) as normative over a statement made in discussing the specific subject (women speaking).