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# **The Role of Women in the New Testament Church\***

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The role of women in the new testament church is a vital subject for any congregation wishing to derive its church order from the new testament. Many different traditions have arisen in various church groups about participation of women singing, praying, testifying, teaching and other aspects of church life. We owe no reverence to any tradition, but only to scripture. The importance of this subject in scripture is evident from the fact that the Greek word for woman is used 214 times in the new testament, 104 of these times in the Acts and Epistles. The congregation with the will to find and follow the scriptural teaching about the role of women in the church will surely be blessed and benefitted. Let us look to scripture for the principles concerning the role of women in the new testament church, and for the application of these principles (1) to the general role of women in the new testament church and (2) to the specific role of women in the new testament church-meeting.

## **I. Two basic principles**

There are two principles concerning the role of women in the new testament church. The first principle is that in standing before God, women are equal with men. ‘There is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal.3:28b).<sup>1</sup> ‘However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originated from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God’ (1 Cor.11:11,12). Therefore, since women have equal standing before God, they share in such important truths as personal salvation through Christ (‘Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things . . . but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ’ 1 Pet.1:18,19), the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (‘But if anyone does not have the Spirit

\* This paper was originally published in 1971 as CBRF Occasional Paper Number 4.

of Christ, he does not belong to him' Rom.8:9b), and the priesthood of all believers ('You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ . . . but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' 1 Pet.2:5,9).

The second principle concerning the role of women in the new testament church is that the man is to be the head of the woman. 'But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman, and God is the head of Christ' (1 Cor.11:3). Woman is equal to man just as Christ is equal to God, and she is to be submissive to man as Christ submits to the Father — the willing submission of an equal. It is significant that the Greek word used when speaking of the obedience of slaves and children (*hupakouein* — Col.3:20-28; Eph.6:5) is not used to refer to the submission of the woman (here the word is *hypotassesthai* — 1 Cor.14:34; Col.3:18; Eph.5:21). The reason that the woman is to be submissive even though she is not inferior is that God intended this relationship, as can be seen in the method of creation: 'For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but for the man's sake' (1 Cor.11:8-9).

We may hold both of these principles without contradiction, for willing submission is not a denial of equality. All the passages about the role of women in the new testament church are in harmony with both of these principles. We can test an interpretation of a passage about the role of women by checking to see if that interpretation either gives a woman headship over man or denies her spiritual equality with man.

## **II. General role of women in the new testament church**

Having observed the two principles that woman is equal with man before God and that woman is to be subject to man, let us look to scripture to find the general role of woman in the new testament church. We will look for specific commands and for examples which illustrate precepts. The role of a christian woman and wife and mother is more important than is generally realised. A mother's teaching may influence the whole direction of a person's life, as it apparently did for Timothy (2 Tim.1:5). A godly christian mother is by no means 'just a housewife'. The rearing of children is considered an important role for women in the new testament, as is evident from the instructions about

widows in 1 Tim. Having brought up children was a requirement for being enrolled as a widow (1 Tim.5:10), and Paul wished the younger widows to 'get married, bear children, keep house' (1 Tim.5:14). The mother's position has been exalted by the fact that even the Son of God was 'born of a woman' (Gal.4:4), and, as Hay says, "The faithfulness and spiritual knowledge of the next generation of believers depends to no small extent upon the believing women of this generation."

The role of a christian woman as a wife is no less important, for God said at the very first, 'It is not good that the man should be alone' (Gen.2:18 ASV). Apparently it is only as a special gift that some men are enabled to live effectively for Christ without the help of a wife (Matt.19:12). A man may not serve as an elder or deacon unless his wife and family give faithful testimony (1 Tim.3:2-5,12; Tit.1:6). We also find missionary wives in the new testament, for Paul writes, 'Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?' (1 Cor.9:5). The woman's role as a christian wife and mother is vital to the progress of the church.

However, we must not limit the ministry of women to the home alone, for God's word does not do so. Women may also serve as workers for the Lord in a more direct sense. 'Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord' (Rom.16:12). The three names in verse 12 are names of women. In another letter Paul says, ' . . . help these women (Euodia and Syntyche) who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel' (Phil.4:3a). These two women who disagreed (as men also have been known to do) apparently had helped Paul in some phase of evangelistic work.

Women also may be workers for a particular local assembly. ' I commend to you sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well' (Rom.16:1,2). 'Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you' (Rom.16:6). It is uncertain whether 1 Tim.3:11, 'women must likewise be dignified, not like malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things,' refers to the wives of men workers of the church (deacons) or to women workers of the church (deaconesses), since the Greek language uses the same word for woman and wife. The widows supported by the church may have had special responsibilities to the assembly also (1 Tim.5:5,9,10).

The woman also is to teach under certain circumstances (not in the

church meeting, however, as we shall see later). ‘Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behaviour, not malicious gossips, nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, that they may encourage (margin:train) the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonoured’ (Tit.2:3-5). This is quite an ambitious amount of teaching, and it could take some effort and planning on the part of the spiritual women in the assembly, probably with the assistance of the elders. Apparently a woman may also teach or help to teach a man privately, for Priscilla and Aquila (with the wife named first) met with Apollos privately and ‘explained to him the way of God more accurately’ (Acts 18:26). This incident may suggest a solution for cases in which a woman has more training or knowledge in some area than the men in an assembly. She could teach one or two of them privately and they could teach the entire church-meeting, as in the case of Apollos.

Hospitality is another important aspect of the ministry of women. John Mark’s mother opened her house as a gathering place for prayer (Acts 12:12), and some have suggested that this may indicate that hers was the home in which one assembly met regularly. Lydia urged her hospitality upon Paul and his company when he went to Macedonia (Acts 16:15). Home bible studies, home prayer cells, entertainment of christian workers, entertainment of lonely people, and provision of a home for youth meetings are just a few of the ways to exercise this ministry today.

Women are not, of course, limited to specific things mentioned in scripture, but may engage in any good work which is in harmony with the two principles outlined at the beginning of this article. ‘Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments; but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness’ (1 Tim.2:9,10). Dorcas is a good example of a woman whose fame depended upon good works rather than fashion. ‘This woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity, which she continually did’ (Acts 9:36b). The spirit which should characterise all of a woman’s ministry and life is expressed in 1 Peter 3:3,4: ‘And let not your adornment be external only — braiding the hair and wearing gold jewellery, and putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God’.

### III. Role of women in the new testament church-meeting

To recapitulate, we have observed two scriptural principles concerning the role of women in the church: first, that the woman has equal standing with the man before God as a christian, involving such truths as salvation, reception of the Holy Spirit, and the priesthood of all believers; and second, that the woman is to accept the headship of man. Let us now look to scripture to see how these principles are applied to the new testament church-meeting. Fortunately, in major areas it is not left to our frail wisdom to decide the application, for the scriptural application is clearly outlined by precept and example.

The main passages which we must examine are 1 Cor.11:2-16, 1 Cor.14:34-35, and 1 Tim.2:8-12. It will be our goal as we deal with each passage to interpret it with its most natural meaning, examining it first in its own immediate context, then comparing it to other passages on the same subject. We take it as basic that no scripture may be interpreted so as to contradict or nullify another.

#### A. Three passages and the principle of headship

In each of these three passages, the application is based upon the principle that the woman should express submission to the man: 'the man is the head of the woman' (1 Cor.11:3); let them subject themselves just as the Law also says' (1 Cor.14:34); 'but I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man' (1 Tim.2:12).

#### B. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 — prayer, prophecy and covering

##### *1. Application to men and women*

In Cor.11, this principle is applied to the deportment of men and women when praying and prophesying. How does it apply to men? 'Every man who has something on his head while praying and prophesying disgraces his head' (v.4) and 'For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God' (v.7a). Men converted from Judaism would be used to praying in the synagogue with a cloth on their head. Paul teaches that they should discontinue this practice (a) because their physical head symbolises the glory of God which should not be covered (v.7), and (b) because the man's only head in terms of authority is Christ his superior, so that he should not wear the head-covering which might suggest submission to some other human.

The woman on the other hand should wear the head covering when praying or prophesying, for several reasons. (a) Her head symbolises

the glory of man, which should be covered when approaching God — ‘but the woman is the glory of man’ (v.7b). (b) Man, her equal, is her head as well as Christ, so she should cover her physical head when praying and prophesying as an expression of her submission to man. This shows that she accepts God’s creation of man and woman in this relationship and her place in it — ‘For indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head . . .’ (v.9,10).<sup>2</sup> (c) ‘Because of the angels’ (v.10b). The angels are connected with maintaining the laws and limits of creation, and the covering is an expression of the order intended in creation. Angels also seem to have a special interest in the church.<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce says, “This probably means that angels are invisibly present at church meetings and can learn lessons in propriety from the orderly behaviour of the children of God.” Thus, for a woman to fail to express submission when praying and prophesying is to shock the angels as well as men.

### *2 What was the covering?*

The covering is not the hair itself, for it could be put aside without cutting the hair (‘For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off’ v.6a). “In giving unto woman her hair as a covering nature hints that she should not uncover her head” (Zerbst). Nor is the covering a veil which covers the face, as in some parts of the East today. Zerbst speaks of “. . . the veil, or more correctly stated, of the headcloth for the text speaks of uncovered head (*kephalē*), not of uncovered countenance (*prosōpon*)”. Compare 2 Cor.3:18 which speaks of ‘unveiled face’ rather than ‘unveiled head’. The word for a veil which covers the face (2 Cor.3:13) is not used in 1 Cor.11. So the covering was a cloth over the hair, but not the face. It was the usual custom for a Greek woman to pull the upper fold or lappet of her robe on to her head so as to hang down on to the brow. One may see pictures of this general type of covering in *Harper’s Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, pp.676 and 1670.

### *3. Does the chapter apply to both married and unmarried?*

Some have considered that Paul’s main purpose here is to protect and preserve marriage and that it therefore applies only to married women. However, since the demeanour of the unmarried also affects the preservation of marriage, a word about marriage is also a word about the relationship between the sexes in general. Thus it seems best to take 1 Cor.11 as generally applying to both married and unmarried women.

*4. Does the context indicate a church meeting?*

Does the context indicate that chapter 11 refers to praying and prophesying in the church meeting or in some kind of family or private meeting? Several factors indicate that it refers to a church meeting. (a) There is nothing in this context to indicate that it refers to a private meeting. Furthermore, "at this early date, the distinction between public and private christian meetings — in church or in house — was very imperfectly developed" (Findlay), and it is questionable whether the headcloth would be so important for the home. (b) On the other hand, praying and prophesying are normal church meeting activities, so that one would expect some indication if the chapter applied only to some other type of meeting.<sup>4</sup> G. H. Lang, from 'the assemblies', writes, "Chapter 14:4,5,22,24,29-33 makes it unquestionable that prophesying is a gift for exercise in the public gatherings of the church." (c) The reference to angels implies a church setting. "The purpose is that all the angelic powers should now see the complex wisdom of God's plan being worked out through the church" (Eph.3:10, Phillips). (d) There is an explicit reference in the passage to the practice of the churches: 'but if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God' (v.16). Note that the term is 'churches', referring to local gatherings, rather than 'church', referring to christians in general. (e) We also note that women prophesied publicly on the day of Pentecost, which began the church as the body of Christ united by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. 'These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers (Acts 1:14). And when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance' (Acts 2:1-4). 'But this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: "And it shall be in the last days, God says, that I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon my bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of my Spirit and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:16-18). The fact that women as well as men prophesied publicly at the formation of the church (for both were present and all received the Spirit and all spoke) indicates that it was not a usurpation of man's headship for a woman to prophesy in a

public meeting. (f) Finally, it is evident as chapter 11 continues, that the apostle is teaching about the local assembly-meeting at the Lord's table.

It is evident that it is widely recognised that 1 Cor.11 applies to the church meeting from the fact that so many assemblies and church groups require women to wear a head-covering in the church-meeting, on the basis of this passage, since *no other passage in the new testament speaks of a head-covering*. Note that it is *while praying and prophesying* that the head-covering is especially commanded. 'Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with head uncovered?' (v.13) 'Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head' (v.4-5a). Concerning verses 4 and 5, G. H. Lang notes that, "as the first clause implies that men prayed and prophesied, so as certainly does the second imply that women also did so . . . It was idle to direct how persons should be dressed when doing certain acts if in fact they were forbidden to do them at all". F. F. Bruce paraphrases verses 4-5a. 'Any man who engages in public prayer and prophesying with his head veiled does dishonour to his head; but any woman who engages in public prayer and prophesying with her head *unveiled* does dishonour to *her* head.' G. Campbell Morgan notes, "Paul recognised the right of women to pray and prophesy, but certain habits on the part of these who do it must be corrected."

##### 5. Does the teaching apply today?

Finally we must ask if these instructions still apply or if they were intended only for that culture. They must still apply, for they are based upon christian doctrine, which does not change. The teaching that the woman should be submissive "is the keynote of Paul's doctrine on the subject . . . This command cannot fairly be set aside as a temporary regulation due to the state of ancient society" (Findlay). Indeed, these directions for worship do not follow the custom of the times. While the Greek women usually pulled the lappet of their robe on to their head while outside, they *uncovered* their head while sacrificing, as did the men. On the other hand, in Judaism the men prayed with a covering on the head but the women were generally, though not always, silent in the synagogue, unveiled according to Zerbst, although they covered their hair when in the street. Thus, in christian worship both men and women were given new dignity and liberty as compared to Judaism, but a proper distinction between the sexes was preserved as compared to Greek and Roman worship.

Finally, some would hesitate to let these verses apply to present meetings on the basis of the idea that such prophecy ceased in the first century. However, prophesying is not necessarily predicting future events nor revealing new truth. Rather, 'he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation' (1 Cor.14:3 RSV). Lang describes prophecy as giving "a message given by the Spirit at the time, fitting the exact need of the moment, and charged with holy unction to the hearer" and he testifies that many have experienced this.

Hence, we conclude that the regulations about the dress of women while praying and prophesying are based on christian doctrine rather than custom and are still applicable today.

### C. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 — silence

We must now give equal consideration to the statements in 1 Cor.14:34-35. '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.'

#### 1. '*Chattering*' explanation insufficient

Some have noted that the basic meaning of the verb 'to speak (*laleō*) used here is to chatter, and so they claim that Paul is merely prohibiting chattering during the service. This is an insufficient interpretation, for it would apply to men as much as to women. Furthermore, the verb is used over 300 times in the new testament with many different applications, such as talking, questioning, arguing, protesting, etc. In each case we must look at the context to find the significance of this verb.

#### 2. *What kind of speaking is forbidden in this context?*

What kind of speaking was uppermost in the apostle's mind in this particular passage? We should note that there is an emphasis on the teaching situation. "In view of the words which follow, 'let them be *subject*' and 'if they want to *learn*' . . . it appears probable that Paul is thinking of *church-teaching and authoritative direction* as a role unfit for women", according to Findlay. We should keep in mind that teaching in the synagogue and early churches was not done solely by means of a sermon or lecture but by means of dialogue and discussion. The Greek

word *dialogeō* (speak, discuss, conduct a discussion) is used of such meetings in Acts 17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:8-9; 20:9; 24:12,25. The idea is interchange of thought, even of disputing, and it could be very lively. So whatever else the passage may prohibit, it appears that the primary thought is that the women were not to enter into these dialogues by which the congregation was taught, not even by posing questions, for in dialogue and discussion, questions are a part of the teaching process as well as statements. Since teaching is by nature an exercise of authority, it would be a violation of the principle of submission for the woman to enter into the teaching in the church-meeting.

The other hint of the apostle's thought is his instruction that the submission which he is commanding here is to be in accordance with the law. The law teaches that the women should be submissive to man when it records (a) that woman was created out of man and for the sake of man — Gen.2:18, 21-23 cf. 1 Cor.11:8-9; 1 Tim.2:13 — (b) that she was the first to transgress — Gen.3:6 cf. 1 Tim.2:14 — (c) that she was told 'thy husband . . . shall rule over thee' — Gen.3:16 ASV — and (d) that a man could annul a wife's or daughter's vow or pledge on the day he heard of it — Num.30:3-8. However, the submission commanded by the law did not mean that it forbade women to praise and prophesy publicly in the presence of men. Miriam was a prophetess (Ex.15:20, Micah 6:4); Deborah, a married woman, was a prophetess (Judges 4:4); Huldah, a married woman, was also a prophetess (2 Kings 22:14). Words spoken by these women were even included in the inspired word of God, with approval. Immediately after reading the law, Shaphan the scribe and other public men went to inquire of the prophetess Huldah for King Josiah (2 Kings 22:8,10,14-20). Evidently they did not consider the submission required of a woman in that law to prevent her from prophesying before men. Hannah prayed at the sacrifice before the tabernacle when she delivered Samuel to the priests, and her words are recorded as scripture for both men and women to read (1 Sam.1:24-2:10). Mary's praise also is recorded as scripture for both men and women to read (Luke 1:46-55). Anna the prophetess prayed 'night and day' in the temple, and she publicly offered thanks to God there (Luke 2:36-38). A woman healed by Jesus praised God publicly in the synagogue (Luke 13:13). Jesus was criticised for healing on the Sabbath, but the woman was not rebuked for speaking aloud at a public meeting. The law did not prohibit prayer and praise by a woman in public worship either at the tabernacle or in the temple or in the synagogue. "Praise, prayer, and prophesying in public, as moved by the Spirit, being, therefore, not inconsistent with subjection of woman according to the law, how can they be prohibited by a passage which expressly says that its

requirement corresponds to that of the law?" (Lang). That is, a command to silence *based on* the submission required by the law does not include silence in matters where the submission required by the law *permitted* speaking, but only matters which involve the exercise of authority, such as teaching, arguing, questioning, or officiating.

### *3. The difficulty — the assumption that absolute silence is commanded*

After noting that women prophesied at the beginning of the church on the day of Pentecost, as foretold by Joel, that women joined men in public prayer, and that women praying or prophesying in that situation are instructed to wear a head-covering, Lang says, "Now all this testimony of scripture becomes confused and contradictory only when *absolute* silence is supposed to be the requirement of the words (in 1 Cor.14:34-35). Ought not the necessary rule to apply, that later statements must be construed in harmony with earlier, unless they avowedly repeal the earlier?"<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, it is widely recognised that this passage means 'be silent where submission requires it' rather than 'be silent without exception', for nearly all assemblies allow the women to join in the singing and to sing solos. This is not keeping silent, but it is no problem because it is not a type of speaking that involves the exercise of authority.<sup>6</sup> Just as we consider singing a solo as a type of speaking that is compatible with a woman's submissiveness, so the scripture seems to consider public offering of worship in prayer and prophecy as a type of speaking compatible with a woman's submissiveness. For prayer is spoken first of all to God and not to men. It is just as serious an error for a man to use prayer to preach and teach as for a woman. Nor is prophecy an exercise of authority, for it is not premeditated authoritative teaching, but the sharing of a thought, praise, or testimony at the impulse of the Spirit in a way spiritually beneficial to those present. H. L. Ellison, a scholar from 'the assemblies' says, "For me it is incontrovertible that 1 Cor.11:5 permits women to pray and prophesy under certain conditions . . . However 1 Cor.14:34-36 is to be interpreted, and there are more possibilities than most realise, it may not be used as an indirect cancellation of a permission already given." G. Campbell Morgan writes, "Evidently there were women in Corinth given to careless and contentious talk, and that is what Paul was prohibiting. Certainly he was not saying that women have no right to pray or prophesy in the church, because he had already given instructions as to how and under what conditions she was to do it."

**D. 1 Timothy 2:8-12 — teaching and the exercise of authority**

Let us now examine 1 Tim.2:8-12. The first question is whether this passage refers to the church-meeting. It apparently does, for it seems to speak of a gathering in which prayer is offered, men are tempted to dissension, women are tempted to overdress, and instruction is offered. Some take ‘in every place’ to refer to each church-meeting, and others take it to mean everywhere there are men or christians. The passage may have a wider application than the local church-meeting, but it would certainly apply to it as well.

*1. Special exhortations to men and to women*

In verses 8-10 we see special exhortations for men and for women: ‘Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension. Likewise I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments; but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness.’

Lifting up of the hands was the usual posture of prayer in the east, and the early church seems to have adopted the same practice. Since the special command to the women concerns adornment and its relation to good deeds while the special command to the men concerns prayer and its relation to holy living, some have argued from the silence about women praying that they were forbidden to do so. Others, noting that there is no verb in verse 9, say that we should translate not ‘likewise (I want) women to adorn themselves . . .’ as in the version we quoted, but ‘likewise (I want) women (to pray) adorning themselves . . .’ However, neither position is really satisfactory, for both assume more than can actually be demonstrated from this passage of scripture. In verse 8 the position of the words in the Greek shows that the *emphasis* is on prayer rather than upon men as opposed to women. A conservative Greek scholar writes: “the position of *tous andras* (the men) forbids us from supposing that such distinction was the apostle’s main object in this verse . . . As it now stands, the stress is on *proseuchesthai* (to pray).” So to hold that this verse forbids women to pray is an argument from silence, which can be held only if it can be proven from other scriptures on the subject. But it is clear from 1 Cor.11:4-5,13 and the freedom of women under the law to pray publicly that such prayer was not forbidden. On the other hand, to supply the verb ‘to pray’ in verse 9 and so turn it into a command that women pray publicly is also to go beyond what can be proven from the

context. So we must be satisfied to give each command its special application without pressing it to mean more than it states.

## *2. Women forbidden to teach*

In verses 11-12 the apostle turns to the subject of teaching and instructing. ‘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.’ Here we see the same principle that the woman is to be submissive and not to exercise authority over a man, and the implication is that teaching is clearly an exercise of authority. Hence, delivering the sermon or officiating at a meeting or teaching a class of both men and women is not the woman’s role.

We may wonder how scripture can prohibit a woman from teaching (directly or indirectly by posing questions) but allow her to pray or prophesy (or sing) in the church-meeting. It is because the former involves exercise of authority over man, but the latter do not. We have already noted that prayer is directed toward God rather than men. (A woman to pray *to God . . .*’ — 1 Cor.11:13), and that it is not the proper medium for authoritative teaching. Hence, prayer in the church-meeting is not an exercise of authority. However, what is the relationship between prophecy and teaching? Since the verb ‘prophesy’ basically means ‘forthtell’ rather than foretell’, some have used it as if it referred to preaching and teaching from the pulpit. But prophecy and teaching are two different gifts: ‘All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they?’ (1 Cor.12:29). “The difference between prophesying and teaching is simple and uniform. The prophet spoke by immediate impulse of the Spirit, without premeditation or preparation for that particular occasion, whereas the teacher pondered the divine oracles, the word of God, and delivered to the people the fruit of his meditations thereon.” Prophecy builds us up spiritually, but it is not exposition of the scriptures. Perhaps prophecy would include speaking praise of God, testifying to how he saved one or helped in one’s christian life, speaking a word of comfort or encouragement to the believers, etc. Teaching the scriptures, in contrast, of necessity implies a command to believe or to obey some precept. Hence, teaching is forbidden to women in the church-meeting because it is an exercise of authority, but prophecy is permitted because it is not an exercise of authority. Of course, when women do pray or prophesy in the church-meeting, they should do so in a modest and undomineering manner, dressed in clothes that are not extravagant or suggestive, with some kind of modest covering on the head as a symbol of submission.

### E. The priesthood of all believers, including women

We should consider one thing more — the connection of our understanding of these scriptures with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The writer of an Emmaus correspondence course (MacDonald) states, "All children of God are priests of God with all the privileges and responsibilities that go with such a name." This is based upon scriptures such as the following: 'you . . . are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet.2:5); 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood . . . that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pet.2:9); 'And he has made us to be a kingdom, priests to his God and Father' (Rev.1:6a).

Priests in the old testament were those who offered the sacrifices to God. We may offer as sacrifices to God our bodies (Rom.12:1), our material resources (Heb.13:16), and praise to God (Heb.13:15). The priests also *represented* the people of God before Jehovah in the tabernacle. A christian does the same thing when he prays aloud in a group gathered for worship. To permit only a certain group of believers, such as clergy, to pray or to speak praises to God in the church-meeting is to violate the practical implications of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The same is true if we limit prayer and speaking of praises to God in the church-meeting to male believers only. The new testament passages about the priesthood of believers never limit it to males only, and we are clearly taught that there is no difference between male and female believers in doctrines that concern our relation to God, as priesthood does. (There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' — Gal.3:28b). It should be noted that teaching is never mentioned in connection with the priesthood of all believers in the new testament. Rather the comparison is with the duties of sacrifice involved in worship in the old testament (1 Pet.2:5,9). Therefore, it is no violation of the priesthood of all believers that women are not allowed to teach in the church-meeting.

### F. Some notes from church history

Some may wish to know how the early church after the close of the new testament understood these scriptures about whether women pray, prophesy, or teach in the church-meetings. Although practice may have varied somewhat from congregation to congregation in the

post-apostolic age, it is evident that the explanation offered above is consistent with what was widely accepted and practised in the early church. A document entitled *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, written no later than A.D.399, says, "We do not permit our women to teach in the church, but only to pray and to hear those that teach." Clement of Alexandria, about A.D.193, writes in *The Instructor* that the woman should be veiled when she goes to church, 'since it is becoming for her to pray veiled'. Tertullian, about A.D.200, writes in *Against Marcion*, "When enjoining on women silence in the church (in 1 Cor.14:34) that they speak not for the mere sake of learning (although that even they have the right of prophesying, he has already shown when he covers the woman that prophesies with a veil) . . .". This gives us additional confidence that we have found the correct understanding, but of course our authority is scripture, not church history.

## Conclusion

In summary, we see two basic principles: (1) Men and women have equal standing in relation to God, including matters such as salvation, reception of the Holy Spirit, and the priesthood of all believers; (2) Woman is to be subject to man. Outside the church-meeting we find women in the roles of christian wife and mother, christian worker for a local assembly and, in a wider sense, teacher of an individual and of other women, giver of hospitality, and doer of good works. In the church-meeting we find that women (a) are forbidden to teach or otherwise exercise authority over men (1 Cor.14:35, 1 Tim.2:12), (b) are permitted to pray and prophesy but are to wear a head-covering when doing so (1 Cor.11:5,13), and (c) are to dress modestly and discreetly (1 Tim.2:9).

What about cases not directly dealt with in the bible? In those cases, we should follow general principles: Is it a violation of the headship of the man? ('The man is the head of the woman' — 1 Cor.11:3). Does it involve authoritative teaching in the church-meeting? ('I do not allow a woman to teach . . . a man' — 1 Tim.2:12). Is it a rightful exercise of the priesthood of all believers? ('A holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices . . . That you may proclaim the excellencies of him . . .' — 1 Pet.2:5,9).

H. L. Ellison, a full-time worker in fellowship with the assemblies and a well known author, quotes approvingly from a letter written to him by a missionary to the moslems. "I wish you'd let the sisters pray audibly in church meetings . . . After eleven years of experience here, where women are allowed to pray, I wouldn't like to go back to our

home tradition in which I was reared — the priesthood of all male believers.” Ellison continues: “There follow three delightful but unreplicable sketches. The first, headed ‘East’, shows a woman completely covered by a veil with the caption ‘*burqa*=suppression’ . . . The second, headed ‘N.T.’ shows her with merely a partial veil, and the caption is ‘covering, 1 Cor.11:10= controlled expression’. The third, headed ‘West’, shows no sign of covering, and the caption is ‘unrestrained liberty’.”

Which shall we choose?

#### **Postscript (added in 1979)**

After eight years of trying to put this paper into practice as a church planting missionary in Colombia, what changes would I make? Experience in five assemblies begun and continuing has shown that the women have grown spiritually as they were encouraged to verbalise their testimony and worship, but that the men have maintained leadership in both the teaching and the open meetings such as the Lord’s supper. However, some changes are in order.

First, as a result of cross-cultural experience, I would be much more open to the possibility that the head-covering is cultural. Nevertheless, I have not found a convincing dynamic equivalent which would be understandable to the average christian trying to draw her ecclesiology directly from the new testament. Therefore, I still encourage the use of the head-covering.

Second, the kind of speaking referred to in Cor.14:34-35 deserves much more research. For example, I would no longer reject out-of-hand the possibility that the problem was women shouting across the aisle to ask their husbands questions since I have seen similar interruptions in new churches in Colombia.

Third, further reflection on 1 Tim.2:9 has led me to consider that ‘to pray’ is the correct verb to supply. It is primarily a statement about how women should be adorned when in public prayer.

Fourth, I would greatly expand the section on the implications of the priesthood of all believers for women. Eight years ago the goal was simply to convince Brethren that women could speak in the meetings in some way, but in Colombia I have had to face questions such as whether women may give thanks for the bread and wine, distribute them, baptise and guide in worship. The conclusion is ‘yes’, and not just because of necessity in a missionary situation, but because these actions are a legitimate exercise of the priesthood of all believers. The real debate should be not whether some women as well as some men

may be priests, but whether all born-again women as well as all born-again men are in fact priests.

Fifth, the question of deaconesses especially deserves much fuller treatment. Phoebe, the women of 1 Tim.3:11 and probably Rom.16:6, and the widows of 1 Timothy would be in this category. If a woman may be a minister (deaconess), how may she minister, to whom, with what responsibility, and therefore with what authority? Within the scope of the two principles of spiritual equality and male headship, the concept of deaconesses suggests a much broader ministry than our traditions permit off the mission field. On the field such ministry has often been accepted but on the pragmatic basis of the scarcity of men rather than the biblical basis of the role of a deaconess. It is interesting that commendation, which is the closest the Brethren come to ordination, is as available to women as to men.

Finally, any revision would have to take into account eight years of abundant literature on this subject.

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## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.
2. 'Therefore' (*dia touto*) probably refers back to verses 8-9, with the phrase about angels added as a further reason. See Findlay, II, 874.
3. See 1 Cor.4:9, 1 Tim.5:21, Eph.3:10, 1 Pet.1:12.
4. The same objection applies to Grosheide's contention that this is a public meeting, but not a church-meeting (Frederik Willem Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp.251-252). As David J. A. Cline ('Women in the Church — a Survey of Recent Opinion', *The Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship*, X, December 1965, 34), says: "the dichotomy 'public' versus 'private' is a misleading one, and . . . the only meaning that can be given to 'public' and 'private' in Corinth is 'in the street, out of doors', and 'at home, in the house'. Church meetings and family worship alike would have been private in this sense." Grosheide's position also fails to account for the other contextual evidence that Paul is speaking of the church-meeting here.
5. In a helpful personal letter, missionary Gerard Couenhoven pointed out to me that men also are commanded in 1 Cor.14 to be silent. Verse 28 says, 'but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church'. Yet we understand from the context that this means silent with respect to tongues; it does not prohibit the person from speaking in an understandable language. Likewise, verse 30, 'let the first keep silent', does not mean absolute silence, but silence while the other is talking. Similarly, the woman is to be silent only with respect to exercise of authority.
6. Lest anyone feel that singing is not a way of speaking, we note that the verb used for speaking in 1 Cor.14 (*laleō*) is the same one used in Eph.5:19, 'speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs . . . '.