

# Study 19: Women's Role in the Church

## **Introduction**

The role of women in the church is an issue in modern society. It was just as much an issue in the Corinthian society. The discussion in chapter 14 is specifically about the use of the miraculous gifts, but there is a much wider application for the role of women in the church.

## **Body of the Study**

### **Introduction to the issues**

### **Women's culture in the first century**

### **The context of the Corinthian church**

### **Paul's call to orderliness in the assembly**

### **The specific instruction**

### **Teaching from other passages**

### **The teaching role for women in the church**

### **What about bible classes?**

## **Homework and preparation for next week:**

- *What should happen in an assembly where the only men are "not capable" of teaching?*
  - *What special roles of teaching by example apply specifically to women in the church, that men cannot achieve?*
  - *What things also preclude women from the leadership roles in the church of being elders or deacons?*
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- Read the notes as a review of the study.
  - Read chapter 15 in preparation for next week's study.

# Notes for study 19: Women's Role in the Church

## Introduction

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## Body of the Study

### ***Introduction to the issues***

There are a wide variety of views on the role of women in the church. At one extreme is a hard and fast view of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians: "...*let the women keep silence in the church, for it is not permitted for them to speak...*" from which some conclude that women cannot say anything at all, under any circumstances, and in any meeting of the church.

At the other extreme is the modernist view that what Paul was teaching was only *his* view, and his view is just as valid as any other. Together with that view goes the cultural issue of the first century, and it is compared to role that women have in society today via the women's movement. The conclusion that is drawn is that women's role in the church is equal to that of the men, and that there is no problem with women taking a prominent leadership role.

Those who have been through my studies will recognise that I am very much a fundamentalist, and the answer to the modernists approach can be found in the very chapter that we are studying where I will paraphrase Paul to say "...*you have the spiritual gifts, use them to acknowledge (and confirm the word) that the things that I write are not what I think, but what God commands...*" (1:14:37). For this reason, we will spend very little time in response to the modernist position.

To have a proper understanding of the issues, we need to have a proper understanding of the cultural role of women in the first century, and in Corinth in particular. We then need to note how Paul instructs the Corinthians to behave in the broader context of the letter. Then we need to note what is taught in the other passages of the New Testament, and finally make some applications to our society.

### ***Women's culture in the first century***

Women in the society of bible times were generally suppressed, and had very subservient roles compared to men. The place of women in Israel was the exception to the rule, and women enjoyed much greater freedom than the surrounding heathen nations. "...Israelite law was designed to protect woman's weakness, safeguard her rights, and preserve her freedom (Deuteronomy 21:10-14; 22:13; 22:28). Under divine law her liberties were greater, her tasks more varied and important, and her social standing more respectful and commanding than that of her heathen sister..."<sup>1</sup>

Despite this place of honour and respect, women led a *segregated* life. Any map of the Temple of Jerusalem will show that just beyond the court of the Gentiles (where any Gentile could go) was the court of the women. Beyond that, was the court of the men, where men could go but not women (and for completeness, then an area where only the priests could go, and then the holiest place where only the High Priest could go). In the synagogue worship, the men would sit on one side, whilst the women were segregated on the other side by a lattice partition.

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<sup>1</sup> Lockyer, Herbert "All the Women of the Bible" ISBN 0-310-28151-2 p.13  
Study of Corinthians by Graeme Offer

Women were generally regarded in the pagan society as possessions of the men, and were given little credence, and owed him absolute fidelity. In contrast, women in the early church were noted for their spirituality, devotion, and for teaching others.

### ***The context of the Corinthian church***

The comments made by Paul were specifically in the context of the exercise of the miraculous gifts. There is no doubt that women possessed the gifts, as we have noted from the daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:9). We should also note the prophecy of Joel, which came to fruition at Pentecost “...*your sons and daughters will prophesy...*” (Acts 2:17). The gift of prophecy, along with the other miraculous gifts was given *through the laying on of the apostles hands* (Acts 8:17-18). This shows several things:

1. God through the person of the Holy Spirit approved of women possessing the gifts,
2. The apostles must also have approved of the women receiving the gifts for them to have laid their hands on them,
3. The gifts must have been expected to be used by the women in some way.

Paul has just explicitly (1:14:32) and implicitly (1:14:28) instructed the Corinthians to exercise control over their gifts so that they might be used in the church in an appropriate way. This of course would equally apply to the women who possessed the gifts.

There is some evidence of women pleading before magistrates for themselves and others in the courts, however the general practice was that women would not speak in public settings.

“We do not know what the ‘public’ role of wives in a secular association would have been, but there is important evidence of the prejudiced attitude to them in a public setting. Valerius Maximus, writing in the Principate of Tiberius, asked, ‘What business has a woman with a public meeting? If the ancient custom be observed, none.’ However in his *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* he could cite a number of instances where they spoke in public venues. Sempronia, the wife of Scipio Aemilianus, who did so in the first century B.B., was an exception and only did so because of exceptional circumstances. We know nothing of the details of the case except that it was clearly a grave matter which resulted in her being brought before a Tribune of the Plebs.”<sup>2</sup>

So, when we apply to the *practice* of the use of the gifts into the *culture* of Corinth in the first century, we can see that things are headed on a collision course.

### ***Paul’s call to orderliness in the assembly***

Throughout the latter part of the first Corinthian letter, Paul is emphasising the practice of appropriate behaviour in the church. He discusses them in relation to these aspects of their worship and assembly:

- Women in subjection to man (1:11:3-16)
- Misuse of the Lord’s Supper (1:11:17-34)
- Misuse of the spiritual gifts (1:12:1-1:14:40)
- Women speaking in the assembly (1:14:34-35)
- Misunderstanding concerning the resurrection (1:15:1-58)
- Misunderstanding of their responsibilities to help others (1:16:1-4)

The teaching in relation to women speaking in the assembly must be read in this context. He has already instructed them that God has put order in the church. God – Christ – Apostles – Man – Woman (1:11:3; 1:12:28).

To have a woman “speaking in the assembly” – probably by the insistence that she exercise her spiritual gifts – was not only a violation of the culture in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinth, it was also a violation of the orderliness that God has established for the church.

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<sup>2</sup> Winter, Bruce W. “After Paul Left Corinth” ISBN 0-8028-4898-2 p.135  
Study of Corinthians by Graeme Offer

## **The specific instruction**

The NIV makes an interesting connection with the application of Paul's teaching "...to all the churches of the saints..." by connecting it directly with women speaking in the assembly. The KJV, NKJV, and NASB all put the application as directly connected to the use of the spiritual gifts. Of course, all of the apostle's teaching applies to all of the churches, and the teaching of Paul is no different.

*"...As in all the congregations of the saints,<sup>34</sup> women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.<sup>35</sup> If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church..." (1:14:33-35 NIV)*

So, let's note what Paul says here:

1. Women should remain silent,
2. They are not permitted to speak,
3. They must be in submission,
4. The Law also says the same thing,
5. They were apparently asking questions during the assembly,
6. If they have any questions, then they are to ask their husbands at home,
7. It is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly.

Before we look at what some of the other passages say, we should note that the things that were happening must have had a disruptive effect on the assembly, and this would go directly against the requirement for orderliness (1:14:40). Regardless of whether they were asking questions "out loud", or were having a low-level discussion, if what they were doing was disruptive and detracted from the orderliness of the assembly, then they were not to do it.

*"A woman's request for knowledge was not to be denied, since she was a human being equal to the man. Her questions could be answered at home rather than by asking her husband in the public service and so possibly interrupting the sermon...That he assumes there were many married women in the congregation is evident from his reference to "their husbands"... He does not address himself to the question of where unmarried women were to get their questions answered. We may assume, however, that they were to talk in private with other qualified persons, such as Christian widows, their pastor or elders who were "able to teach". At any rate, a woman's femininity must not be disgraced by her trying to take a man's role in the church..." (NIVBC)*

## **Teaching from other passages**

There are numerous passages that teach concerning the character that a godly woman is to have. This study will not deal with them extensively. Paul gives some instructions to the young evangelist Timothy about *how we ought to behave ourselves in the church* (1 Tim 2:15). In this context he says:

*"...<sup>1Ti 2:9</sup> I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,<sup>10</sup> but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. <sup>1Ti 2:11</sup> A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. <sup>12</sup> I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. <sup>13</sup> For Adam was formed first, then Eve. <sup>14</sup> And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner..." (1 Tim 2:9-14 NIV)*

This passage goes to the heart of the matter, for Paul goes right back to the order (and orderliness) in determining the issue. He says:

1. It was Adam (man) who was formed first, then Eve (woman)
2. The woman was deceived first

To which he might also add that the woman was created and formed out of the man (Gen 2:21-23), and that it was the woman who deceived the man (Gen 3:6). Whether we like it or not, these

are the facts, and they cannot be changed nor disputed (without a challenge to the authority of scripture).

Notice how Paul connects these things directly to the teaching role of women in the church: “...*a woman is not to teach, nor is she to be in a position of authority over a man, because Adam... (etc)*”

Ryrie notes:

“...The fact that Adam was first formed means that he had first an independent existence and could in no way be subordinate to Eve. He further adds the idea that “The woman’s yielding to the wiles of a serpent shows her to be an unsafe guide”. Subordination, dependence, and difference of nature are the three reasons the early church assigned for the non-participation of women in public vocal ministry, and this regulation of silence was not grounded in special and temporary conditions in the church but was related to a far more basic and fundamental reason, that is, the difference in position and nature of male and female. These are the facts whether we like them or not, and this appears to be the only solution which makes all the texts consistent with one another...”<sup>3</sup>

The place of women in submission to their husbands (or to “any man” for that matter) is also shown in the Ephesian letter:

“...*EPH 5:22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything...<sup>Eph 5:32</sup> This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband...*” (Eph 5:22-24; 32-33 NIV)

Paul instructs us about the *character* that women are to develop:

“...*TIT 2:3 Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. <sup>4</sup> Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, <sup>5</sup> to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God...*” (Tit 2:3-5 NIV)

“...*1TI 3:11 In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything...*” (1 Tim 3:11 NIV)

Implicit in developing that *character* is the need to do something with it. Paul discusses some of the roles for women, including that of *training the young women*. So, how are they to train the young women without teaching? Obviously they can’t, and it is therefore implicit that there is a teaching role for women in the church.

### ***The teaching role for women in the church***

Whilst the role of women in the church is clearly not in the public leadership position (whether preaching, teaching, praying, or in any other way), that is not to say that women have no role. Exactly the contrary is true. For example, Priscilla (with her husband Aquilla) played an important teaching role in correcting Apollos (Acts 18:26).

We have already noted that older women do have an important teaching role in training younger women. The important distinction that Paul has made is that the women are to be in submission to the men, which would preclude a woman from teaching when a man was there. But what about the situation when there were no men there? [If the congregation was made up totally of women, all of whom were *to be silent* and not speak, and all of whom were to *learn in silence*, then nothing at all could be said, and no one would learn anything! This clearly is not what Paul has in mind.]

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<sup>3</sup> Ryrie, Charles C. “The Role of Women in the Church” ISBN 0-8024-7371-7 p.79  
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But what about a woman teaching a class of children? Or a class of other women? Paul has specifically instructed (and authorised by approved example) the women to teach children (2 Tim 1:5-6; 3:15), and other women (Titus 2: 3-4). The pattern that God has given is for a woman not to usurp the authority that God has given to the man in the public leadership roles of the church. But Paul's instruction goes beyond that. Some people argue that the woman who *has permission to speak* (or lead in prayer, or lead in any other way) is not usurping her authority, but is using the specific authority she has been given. The problem lies with 1 Tim 2:12 and 1 Cor 14:34 "...*she must be silent...*". However the problem also lies with the fact that the men are not authorised to ask her to do anything that is contrary to God's law.

### ***What about bible classes?***

In the New Testament we have the church coming together to worship on the first day of the week, primarily for worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). It is in exactly this context that Paul writes the instructions for 1 Cor 14. But the Christians in the New Testament also came together at other times apart from the "assembly" (Acts 2:46). It is prudent to consider whether Paul's instructions apply to such situations?

The answer must lie in the consideration of a range of teaching and observation from the New Testament. For example, in Php 4:3, both Euodia and Syntyche are noted as having been Paul's *fellow workers*. Given that they were not to have a public leadership role (as we have already noted) then they must have helped in other ways. [Of course, it is possible that they only helped by cooking and washing his clothes, but that is not the context in which they are presented in the Philippian church.] We have also noted the role of Priscilla (Acts 18:26).

In Acts chapter 12, Peter was imprisoned in Jerusalem, and was freed by an angel. A prayer meeting was being held at the house of one of the prominent women. A servant girl named Rhoda came to Peter at the front gate, and then ran back inside. At this time, she announced to the meeting that Peter was at the gate (Acts 12:12-14). So, if the women were to be totally silent even in bible class (or a prayer meeting), then how could Rhoda have done such a thing? Of course, by the example here, we *DO NOT* see Rhoda in a teaching position!

We should also note that by its very action, being assertive in a bible class, or being disruptive by chattering and carrying on with side conversations is exactly what Paul said that the women were not to do in 1:14:34-35.