



# Women In Ministry At CBC

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## A Crossroads Bible Church Position Paper

The topic of women in ministry has long been debated. We acknowledge this is a controversial subject and good people have differed in their conclusions. The following is written to communicate how the Elders of CBC understand the Bible as it addresses the role of women in ministry in the church.

### How we arrived at our position

God's word is foundational truth and the elders want to clearly state our commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture. Inerrancy simply means that there were no errors in the original manuscripts of the biblical text. We have a conservative view of Scripture because God wrote it, and he doesn't make mistakes. The Bible is our guide for identifying ministry roles and practices that are pleasing to God. We have carefully studied the Bible regarding this topic and have arrived at our position from Scripture.

While various denominations and individual churches may disagree on the roles gender plays in church leadership, we can agree that God is same yesterday, today, and tomorrow and that his Word will indelibly remain forever.

There are two common mind-sets we have sought to avoid in our own process:

1. Allowing prevailing culture to shape our opinions so profoundly that we resist the Bible's clear instruction.
2. Allowing our religious preconceptions or previous opinions to be retained apart from carefully submitting them to the Bible's teaching.

**This is a summary of our understanding of the Scripture's intent for women in ministry:  
It is our consensus that women are called to lead in all areas of ministry, confidently  
expressing their spiritual gifts, with the only limit being the role of elder.**

### Before we begin...

At Crossroads we hold that there are essential beliefs that require unity (Jesus' resurrection, deity, salvation by grace alone, etc.), liberty or freedom in the non-essentials doctrine (different kinds of communion, baptisms, theology on drinking, dancing, etc.), and in all things charity. We want to be true to the Scriptures while also understanding there is space for different views in some areas of theology.

The issue of gender and leadership in the church falls under the liberty category. It does not change the nature or character of God, nor does it change the salvific truths of the Scriptures. While we believe it is important, we hold our position with grace and in love and call others to live out their views on this topic in the same way.

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## We affirm the equality of men and women.

The Bible begins with the equality of both men and women. Genesis 1:27 declares men and women are made as image bearers of God. The word "man" is used in a universal sense. It is generic including both men and women. They are given the shared responsibility, a mission and commission, of joint dominion over the earth. They are called to fill the earth, subdue the earth and rule it together.

But as the human race comes from the hand of the Creator, it comes divided into male and female. Both are made in the image of God. One is not superior and the other inferior. But they are different.

In order for man to accomplish God's mandate of filling, subduing and ruling the earth, he needed a helper. It was God's idea that he not take on this challenge alone. So God gave him a counter-part, a correspondent, his other half. Neither superiority on his part nor inferiority on hers is implied, although, clearly, she is sourced in him. (2:23 "...she shall be called woman for she was taken out of man.") She is the same nature, the same flesh and blood, as he is.

The word "helper" is used often in the Old Testament of God as he helps the needy (Psalm 33:20, I Samuel 7:12). There is no hint of subordination in this term. They work side by side. Woman is man's equal. Woman was made for man in Genesis 2, but even when Paul makes that point in I Corinthians 11:9, he immediately adds:

*"In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God."*

Although she stands by his side, she is different from Adam. God did not desire simply a race of men only. She is his complement and completion. Their differences - expressed in different perspectives, roles and responsibilities - would bring about God's ideal plan.

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## We affirm God's use of both men and women for leadership in ministry.

Throughout the Scriptures, women served in positions of leadership. Both the Old and New Testaments operated in extremely patriarchal societies, so God's specific and purposeful use of women to proclaim the message of the gospel and to lead the early church is informative and important. The consistent leadership of women in the Old and New Testaments, as well as the increasing occurrences of leadership with Jesus and in the early church shows a counter-cultural ethic of women not only as inheritors of God's gospel, but leaders in the gospel efforts.

### **In the Old Testament**

Prophets spoke to God and spoke for God in the Old Testament. There was no higher spiritual calling, and there are several examples of God using women as his mouthpiece in the Old Testament.

1. Miriam was a prophet as a helper to her brother Moses. (Exodus 15:20)
2. Deborah was a prophet and the highest leader in all of Israel. (Judges 4-5)
3. Huldah was a prophet to king Josiah. (2 Kings 22:11-23:25)

Not only did women serve as prophets, they also served as civic leaders, in the temple services, and as examples of people God chooses and charges with furthering His redemptive story.

1. Women served in the doorway of the Tabernacle. (Exodus 38:8, I Samuel 2:22)
2. A woman's words are recorded in Proverbs 31.
3. Women sang in the Temple choirs. (Nehemiah 7:66-67)
4. Women were charged with proclaiming God's truth. *"The Lord gives the command; The women who proclaim good news are a great army."* (Psalm 68:11)
5. The prophet Joel predicted that the time would come when, *"your sons and your daughters will prophesy...Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."* (Joel 2:28-29)

## Jesus' Inclusion of Women

Jesus set a new precedent by including women among his disciples. (Luke 8:1-3, John 4:39-42, and Matthew 28:1-10.) His inclusion of women was previously unimagined in Jewish culture.

At the time of Jesus, women in Jewish society were limited mainly to domestic duties and did not study Torah or take an active role in the synagogue. Jesus broke with convention and offered religious instruction to women. Mary of Bethany sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his word, which indicates that she had joined the road of discipleship (Luke 10:39). Jesus included many women in his itinerant preaching ministry (Luke 8:3). They were taught, trained in ministry, and sent out to preach the Kingdom. After the resurrection, while the eleven remaining apostles were in hiding, it was the female disciples that Jesus sent to announce the good news to them (Matthew 28:7-10; John 20:17). Such a commission defied Jewish convention that viewed women as unreliable and invalid witnesses in courts and legal matters. Yet Jesus entrusted them with the most crucial testimony of all: "*I have seen the Lord*" (John 20:18).

Other instances of Jesus' use of women in his ministry include:

1. Mary, the mother of Jesus, announced to the world that Christ had come. (Luke 1:46-55)
2. Anna was a prophetess and evangelist in the Temple who continually and publicly spoke about Jesus. (Luke 2:36-38)
3. Loyal women accompanied Jesus on his ministry tours and supported him financially. (Matthew 27:55, Mark 15:41, Luke 8:1-3)
4. Jesus spoke publicly with a Samaritan woman and in contrast to rabbinic standards, treated her with respect. (John 4:4-26)
5. Jesus had women friends in contrast to custom. (Luke 10:38-42)
6. Jesus ministered to the physical ailments of women. (Mark 1:29-31, Luke 8:40-56; 13:10-13)
7. Jesus defended women in a male-dominated culture. (Matthew 19:3-10; Mark 10:11, Luke 7:11-17; 20:47)
8. Jesus publicly affirmed women in front of men. (Luke 7:44-50)
9. Jesus lauded Mary's action of sitting at His feet to learn—a privilege culturally reserved for men only. (Luke 10:42)
10. Women praised Jesus publicly in the synagogue. (Luke 13:13)
11. Women stood by Jesus at the cross (John 19:25) and some lingered and watched his burial when most of the male disciples had already fled. (Mark 15:47)
12. Mary became the first of his followers to see the empty tomb (Luke 24:10), to speak to the risen Christ (John 20:16) and to proclaim the message of the resurrection (Luke 24:10)
13. Jesus first appeared to women after His resurrection. He commissioned them as the first witnesses of the good news in a culture where women were traditionally prohibited from being witnesses in a court setting. (Mark 16:9, John 20:10-18)

## In the Early Church

The use of women in leadership roles didn't end when Jesus ascended but continued in the early church.

1. Women prayed with the apostles in the upper room; men and women prayed together. (Acts 1:14, 12:12)
2. The Holy Spirit fell on both men and women at Pentecost. (Acts 2:1-4)
3. Peter related the Pentecostal outpouring to Joel's prophecy "*Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...*" (Acts 2:17,18)
4. Women in the early church were persecuted and suffered for their faith because their activity in ministry and proclamation made them targets of persecution. (Acts 22:4)
5. Dorcas was a disciple well known and respected for her service to the church. (Acts 9:36-42)
6. Mary, the mother of Mark, was active in hospitality and good works for the Lord. (Acts 12:12)
7. Lydia was a successful business woman and charter member of the church at Philippi; the gospel entered Europe through her open heart and open home. (Acts 16:11-15, 40)
8. Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3) were called fellow-workers by Paul. Other people called that by Paul were Timothy, Apollos, and Mark, and Luke.
9. Philip's four daughters were prophetesses. (Acts 21:8,9).
10. Priscilla and Aquilla took Apollos aside and "*explained to him the way of God more adequately.*" (Acts 18:24-26). Priscilla is consistently named first, indicating that she was the primary teacher of the duo.

11. Apollos was a learned man who spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately- but Scripture says that he only knew about the baptism of John. They instructed him - even though he was "well-versed" in scripture, and he received instruction from a woman. In Romans 16:3, Paul calls Priscilla a "fellow worker".
12. Phoebe was a deacon in the church at Rome. (Romans 16:1,2).
13. Tryphena and Tryphosa were hailed as "women who work hard in the Lord." (Romans 16:12)
14. Persis was a dear friend of Paul's who also worked incessantly for the Lord. (Romans 16:12)
15. Junia is called an apostle. (Romans 16:7) Paul says, "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles." Andronicus is a male name, but Junia is thought by many scholars to be a female. And if that's the case, then we could conclude that women functioned as apostles. The word apostle in this context is not used to designate the original twelve apostles, but a person 'sent out' to take the gospel in a new place as a missionary or a church planter.
16. Women prophesied in the early church. (1 Corinthians 11:5)

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**We affirm women are called to lead as prophets, pastors, deacons, teachers, church planters, and missionaries taking the gospel into other cultures.**

Throughout the New Testament, we see women serve the church in positions of leadership and teaching. Below are the different positions of leadership in the church as seen in the New Testament.

### **Prophet**

Ephesians 2:20 tells us the household of God is built on "the apostles and prophets." These Christian prophets fulfilled an important role in the church. Among those prophesying were women.

1. In Luke 2:36, Anna spoke as a prophet.
2. In Acts 21:9, Luke reports that during Paul's stay in Caesarea with Philip the evangelist, Philip's daughters prophesied over Paul.
3. In 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, Paul gave instruction to women on prophetic etiquette within the church assembly, clearly understanding women were in fact prophesying in the church in Corinth.

### **Teacher**

Women were also found teaching, and even instructing men in the New Covenant community. Acts 18:24-28 describes "Priscilla and Aquila" as taking Apollos aside in Ephesus and "they explained to him the way of God more adequately." It uses the plural "they," showing that Priscilla is as involved as Aquila in the exercise of teaching. The fact that Priscilla's name appears before her husband's leads many to believe that she was the more prominent teacher, as men's names almost always preceded their wives' names in ancient Roman culture. This bears witness to the fact that in the early church, a woman (Priscilla) teaches a man (Apollos).

Frederik Franson, great missionary leader and founder of The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM), searched both the Old and New Testaments for every reference to any kind of speaking ministry or leadership position carried out by women. He came up with nearly 100 references. "This is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that there are but two or three references which seem to be against women's audible ministry. Yet these few references have been made the basis for muzzling women in spite of the fact that the main thrust of Scripture is against such silencing." (L.E. Maxwell, Women in Ministry, p.97). While there a small number texts that command women to be silent in the church (1 Timothy 2:8-15 and I Corinthians 14:34-35) both were culturally and historically specific, not universal principles for all time and places. For more, please see attached appendix on those passages.

### **Pastor**

In today's church, the role of pastoring is often equated with the office of elder. However, the biblical gift of pastoring does not necessarily mean that a person is an elder. The Greek term poimen simply means, "shepherd" (Matthew 9:36; 26:31; Luke 2:8; John 10:2; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25).

This ministry gifting describes a person equipped to provide spiritual nurture to others, and an individual who guards others from threats to their faith. In the New Testament, the work of shepherding-pastoring was done by

men and women. For example, in Acts 18, Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, led Apollos to a more complete understanding of the Gospel. She and Aquila were clearly 'pastoring' Apollos.

## **Deacon**

In Romans 16:1-2, Phoebe is called a deacon (diakonos).

Furthermore, in 1 Timothy 3:8-11 qualifications for deacons include women:

*"Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things."* NASB

The word "likewise" connects women to this same list of attributes indicating that female deacons were to be similarly qualified as male deacons.

## **Church Planter and Missionary**

In Romans 16:7 Paul refers to a man and woman named Andronicus and Junia as apostles. The word apostle in this context is not used to designate the original twelve apostles, but a person 'sent out' to take the gospel in a new place as a missionary or a church planter. So, from this context, we learn that Paul was sending greetings to a man and a woman, likely a husband and wife team, who were both at some point 'sent out' to fulfill an apostolic role as missionaries or church planters.

Acts 16 tells Lydia's story. Following her baptism, she opened her household to Paul, his co-workers, and the new Christian congregation. Lydia acted as a benefactress of the church in line with the Roman model of patronage. In the first-century Roman culture, female patrons were active and influential in the community's public life. As part of the new order that belongs to the new creation, Lydia was not subject to the same restrictions on women's leadership that were customary in the synagogue. The role of women in the ministry of Jesus models this new situation. As domina (the female form of the Latin word for master or owner) of her household and patron of the house church, she functioned as a congregational leader.

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**We affirm the Bible designates the office of elder to be held by men.**

## **Distinction between Ministry and Office**

Ministry is what we all do when serving the mission of the church using our God-given spiritual gifts. Paul lists spiritual gifts without reference to gender, indicating that God gives spiritual gifts to all believers regardless of their gender. (Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:3-11 & 28-30, Ephesians 4:7-13, and 1 Peter 4:7-11).

An office is a scripturally defined role of governance formally affirmed by the church. The Bible describes two offices: Deacons and Elders

## **Deacons**

Deacons are first mentioned in Acts 6 when the Twelve Apostles, the overseers or elders of the Jerusalem Church, delegated care of the widows to people they called 'deacons' (diakonos). This word simply means 'servant,' but over time this word became a title associated with an office of the church.

Deacons assisted elders carrying out specific duties to advance the mission of the church. In the New Testament, both men and women are identified as deacons. (Romans 16:1)

## **Elder**

The New Testament uses two words for elder: Elders (Presbuteros) and Bishops, or overseers (Episkopos). The elders are responsible for the spiritual direction and guidance of the church.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-5 and Titus 1:5-9 Paul lays out the qualifications for Elders/Overseers. In both cases, he includes the phrase "husband of one wife" seemingly limiting the role to men.

Along with specific qualifications, the role of spiritual overseer and guide being limited to men was hinted at in the Old Testament. We see women lead, prophesy, and influence the spiritual life of Israel, but there is no example of a woman holding the office of priest or king. Also, Jesus did allow women to sit and take the posture of a disciple, but when selecting the final twelve for his inner circle and twelve apostles, he only selected men. If Christ built an all-male group of apostles, despite repeatedly demonstrating his willingness to break the cultural taboos of his day in conversing with, teaching, respecting, and including women, then His exclusion of women in His inner circle appears to be one of choice rather than cultural accommodation.

When the qualifications for the office of deacon are presented in the New Testament, both men and women are included. When the qualifications for the office of elder are described in the Bible only men are mentioned. While the Apostle Paul affirmed and called women into significant leadership roles, he also limited the role of elder to men.

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## Specific passages to consider

### Supra-cultural Directive and a Principle

Supra-cultural means that the directive is to be applied in all places at all times, irrespective of cultural norms or shifts. "Do not commit adultery", would be a great example. A principle is an idea that can be applied in a variety of ways depending on cultural realities and is rooted within a specific cultural context. The charge for women to dress a certain way in 1 Corinthians 11 and even the reference to types of jewelry and braided hair in 2 Timothy 2:9 would be examples of principles, not a supra-cultural directives. For example, we don't kick out women with braided hair or gold earrings when we gather today, nor do we require men to raise their hands when in prayer (as stated in 1 Timothy 2). We have to remember Scripture was given at a particular time in a particular cultural context.

The context and culture are key to understanding what the writer of Scripture intended for the audience in that day and for us today. As we look at the passages below, it is important to distinguish between supra-cultural directives and principles, and for the latter we need to understand the historical context in order to learn the principles being taught. As we work to distinguish between the two, we need the immediate context and biblical context, as well as information about the specific language to help us discern principles for that day as opposed to directives for all to follow for all time.

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### 1 Timothy 2:9-15

*9 Likewise the women are to dress in suitable apparel, with modesty and self-control. Their adornment must not be with braided hair and gold or pearls or expensive clothing, 10 but with good deeds, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. 11 A woman must learn quietly with all submissiveness. 12 But I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man. She must remain quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first and then Eve. 14 And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, because she was fully deceived, fell into transgression. 15 But she will be delivered through childbearing, if she continues in faith and love and holiness with self-control.*

### The Context

To interpret scripture accurately, you have to take into account both the immediate context to the biblical audience and the larger context of Scripture itself (other passages). Let's start with the immediate context.

### Immediate Context

Paul's first letter to Timothy was written to his co-worker in Ephesus, and was intended to address specific problems Timothy was encountering in the church at Ephesus, namely false teachers (likely both male and female). False teaching was clearly Paul's primary concern in writing, evidenced by him immediately addressing the matter in the opening of the document instead of giving his normal greeting, and it remains his main concern throughout the entirety of the letter. Unlike many of Paul's epistles, this letter was addressed specifically to Timothy, rather than to the Church at large, implying the seriousness of the particular problem facing the church at Ephesus.

In order to fully grasp the argument Paul makes against women's participation in their gatherings, we have to understand a key component of the culture in Ephesus: the cult of Artemis. Paul's admonitions to the women in Ephesus are seen throughout the letter. He mentions women who had "turned away to follow Satan" (1 Timothy 5:15)



and later addresses *"gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth."* (2 Timothy 3:6-7)

Ephesus was famous for its devotion to Artemis, a female goddess. Paul was addressing a community where goddess worship was common, and often held to female superiority over men. Included among the heretical teaching which seems influenced by Artemis was the idea that Eve was created before Adam and superior to him. Paul refutes this idea when he talks about the relationship between men and women in the church at Ephesus in chapter 4. You can clearly see his call of humility to the women of the church when he addresses how they are to dress modestly in verse 9.

The citizens of Ephesus were greatly influenced by the teachings of the Artemis cult (see the riot Paul experienced while in Ephesus where people in the streets *"were furious and began shouting: 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians'"* in Acts 19:28). Cult practices revolved around female virgins who oversaw thousands of priests and priestesses who led in the worship of Artemis. Paul was writing to Timothy, who was attempting to minister in a context where women came into the church from a pagan background and sought to exercise complete dominating authority over men. The false teachers even upended the social order through prohibiting marriage and family because Artemis' priesthood required celibacy – and Paul addresses that explicitly in the letter in 4:1-5.

The appeal for women to exercise authority over men in a dominating fashion, paired with the influence of the Temple of Artemis and the call to remain virgins and not marry also helps us interpret verses 14 and 15:

*And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. <sup>15</sup> But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.*

Verse 15 is a great example of how cultural and historical context helps us understand a difficult passage. Clearly, women aren't saved through childbirth; we are all saved through the work Jesus. As mentioned above, Paul is refuting a specific problem in that church – namely that women saw themselves as superior and it came at the expense of getting married and having families. In essence, Paul is putting arrogant women in their place. It's also important to note that both men and women were deceived and became sinners in Genesis 3 – the woman by the serpent and the man by the woman. In this context, Paul is specifically speaking to women who seemed to forget they fell as well.

He concludes by reminding women that their hope is found in the gospel, not in temple practices. The word salvation (sozo), used to describe the gift of eternal life, is also used to describe God's deliverance through a difficult experience – like having a baby. Paul is offering women reassurance that God, not Artemis, will be with them as they go through the struggle of labor – saving them from danger, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Paul starts his passage with instructions about how to dress and ends the passage with specific problems of family life affecting that biblical community. Both the beginning and end indicate the context is culturally specific, not supra-culturally directed.

### **Larger Biblical Context**

If we broaden our perspective, we have to ask if Paul really meant for all women to be silent in all churches, or just in that specific context. A key principle in biblical interpretation is that scripture does not contradict itself. As mentioned above, there are specific times when Paul instructs women on how they are to speak in church, assuming it's not only their right but their responsibility. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul instructs women on how they are to prophesy and in Acts 18 Priscilla took Apollos aside and *"explained the way of God to him more adequately."*

The specific cultural context and the larger biblical context indicate that the instructions to Timothy were specifically targeted and to be implemented to the church in Ephesus because of the situation unique to that church.

### **The Language**

Looking at the specific words Paul used helps us understand what was meant, and how it was meant to be applied. Three words in the Greek help us understand the specific meaning of the passage: quiet, I do not permit, and authority.

The word quiet does not mean completely silent in the Greek, but peaceful or subdued. The word for quiet (hesuchia) is used earlier in verse 2 of this same chapter. *"Pray...that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful"*

*in every way.*" The same word 'quiet' does not refer to 'silence,' but a life devoid of contentiousness.

Bringing the context to light, the Ephesian church was experiencing tension and/or conflict during corporate worship (1 Timothy 2:8), and some women likely contributed to the disruption (1 Timothy 2:12), which is why Paul would call for them to be quiet, peaceful, and subdued.

The phrase, "I do not permit" is the Greek word *epitrepo*. Paul used the present active indicative tense in the word *epitrepo* with the negative *ouk*: Literally translated, "I am not currently allowing...". The Greek verb *epitrepo* in the New Testament, in every case, speaks to a specific or limited circumstance. This is consistent with use of *epitrepo* in the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament). It is usually related to a specific and limited situation rather than a universal one. (Genesis 39:6, Esther 9:14, Job 32:14)

Finally, the word Paul uses for authority in verse 12 is *authentain* and is used only once, here, in the entire New Testament.

In the rest of his writings, when Paul speaks of 'proper authority' in the church, he uses the Greek word 'exousia.' (1 Corinthians 6:12, 7:4, 9:4-6, 9:12 & 11:10, 2 Corinthians 2:8, 10:8 & 13:10, Colossians 1:13, 2 Thessalonians 3:12, Romans 6:15 & 9:21). This unique word (*authentain*), when used in other first century writings usually describes the assertion of dominance or aggression. This is why the Latin Vulgate, and several other translations, interpreted this passage as a warning against "usurping authority." According to lexicographers, *authentain* is synonymous with "to dominate someone." The word he uses seems to indicate that Paul is prohibiting women from teaching men in a manner that is aggressively domineering, which would be equally improper for a man.

### **The Big Idea**

Given the large amount of background information informing the cultural landscape of the letter, the specific words Paul used and how he phrased them, and other New Testament texts on women speaking and teaching, the passage on teaching in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 should be seen as a specific principle for a specific time, and does not meet the requirements for a supra-cultural directive. Paul is instructing the church not to teach in a domineering way.

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### **1 Corinthians 14:34-36**

*As in all the churches of the saints, 34 the women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak. Rather, let them be in submission, as in fact the law says. 35 If they want to find out about something, they should ask their husbands at home, because it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church. 36 Did the word of God begin with you, or did it come to you alone?*

### **The Context**

#### **Immediate Context**

The immediate context of Paul's writings to the church in Corinth is clear – church order, specifically in gatherings, is more important than any one person. Look at his words leading into this admonition in verses 26-32:

*What should you do then, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each one has a song, has a lesson, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all these things be done for the strengthening of the church. 27 If someone speaks in a tongue, it should be two, or at the most three, one after the other, and someone must interpret. 28 But if there is no interpreter, he should be silent in the church. Let him speak to himself and to God. 29 Two or three prophets should speak and the others should evaluate what is said. 30 And if someone sitting down receives a revelation, the person who is speaking should conclude. 31 For you can all prophesy one after another, so all can learn and be encouraged. 32 Indeed, the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, 33 for God is not characterized by disorder but by peace.*

It's clear from his lead in, there were disruptions occurring when they gathered. Paul is fighting for church order and making the case that the order in the church reflects on a God of order, not chaos. In verse 34 he specifically speaks to women, but in the previous verses he uses the same logic to speak to anyone who has a song, a lesson, or even a revelation.



In the early church, women were given unprecedented freedom under Christ. Against the cultural landscape of the day, churches let women learn, participate, and even prophesy. In Corinth, some women had taken liberty too far and in doing so created a distraction from the point and purpose of the church – the gospel of Jesus.

It helps to understand some of how early gatherings were conducted. The early church was initially populated by Jews who became Christ-followers, and many patterns for worship were adopted from practices observed within the synagogue.

The described moment in this passage of scripture is consistent with a tradition present in the synagogue when heads of households representing their family, were allowed to ask questions regarding what had been taught that day. They could also contest the teacher's statements, which often led to spirited debates.

Notice how he only addresses married women, not all women in this context, Paul asked women not to participate in these exchanges. Culturally, doing so would be considered an act that would usurp her husband's role as the family spokesman and leader of their household and cause more harm than good – more chaos than order.

### **Larger Biblical Context**

The Bible gives numerous occasions where women speak, pray and prophesy in church gatherings. In chapter 11, Paul gives instructions for how a woman is to pray and prophesy in this specific church. The larger context reveals a problem with order, not a problem with all women speaking in all churches.

In 11:4-5, Paul instructs women to honor their marital relationship by prophesying with their heads covered. If a woman removed her head covering in that time and culture, it inferred she was single. Paul is directing wives to maintain cultural propriety in the church, deferring to their husband as their family spokesman, and retaining their head covering even when they were publicly prophesying, giving honor to their husbands.

The church in Corinth had forgotten the priority of love (Ch 13) in the way they act in the worship service. They have elevated the gift of tongues above all gifts, and they are speaking in tongues during the service in a manner that breeds chaos. In chapters 13 and 14, Paul admonishes the Corinthians to control themselves in the service so that everyone may be edified. He corrects specific errors and gives specific guidelines for the way they are to conduct their assemblies in the future. He even limits the number of people who can speak in tongues during a service to "two--or at the most three." (14:27)

Our God is a god of order, not chaos. You see it from creation in Genesis 1 all the way through the Scriptures. He does not react in frustration or bewilderment, but responds with order and foresight. Churches should reflect God's character, and a chaotic church does not reflect the God they say they serve. Also, no one person is bigger than the message the churches gather to proclaim, a fundamental principle the church in Corinth had forgotten.

Given the immediate and larger biblical context, it's clear the passage is a culturally specific principle.

### **The Language**

The word for "speak" used in verse 34 is *laleo*. It has a broad range of meanings, but it can be interpreted as talking, questioning, arguing, protesting, or any articulate utterance out of the mouth.

G. Campbell Morgan in his commentary on Corinthians 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 a woman had no right to pray or prophesy in the church, because he had already given instruction as to how, and under what circumstances she was to do it. No, something else had crept in--an attitude by women who were contentious."

Also, look at the phrase "remain silent" (Greek *sigatō*).

Context limits and defines what this "silence" means, whether that be a permanent or a temporary silence. The term *sigatō* is used two other times in the preceding verses (v.28, 30). In v.28 when Paul says the person should keep silent in the church he was simply referring to a particular situation where, if there no interpreter was present, the person should keep silent in the church. It was a specific kind of speech that was silenced, but the person could engage in other kinds of speech.

In the same sense, Paul says (v.30) when revelation comes to someone the first person speaking should be silent. There is no indication the first person should never speak again. In both cases, the context defines the application of the term. It is the kind of speech that must be silent, but the people could speak in other ways. The same is true in vv.33-35; not all women should remain forever silent in all contexts within the church. Women are allowed to speak, pray, teach, prophesy, sing, and lead. However, in the Corinthian church, anyone using speech that was disruptive to the worship environment was instructed to be silent.

Again, Paul is calling women to reverence, graciousness, and an attitude which does not call attention to ones self.

### **The Big Idea**

It seems clear from context, Paul is addressing a problem in the church at Corinth, where individuality is trumping the message of the gospel and chaos is threatening people's ability to worship. Paul is reminding his audience and us that order in worship is necessary to clearly see the goodness of God, and that no one person or practice should stand in the way from all of us worshipping God together.