

# **The Role of Women in Pauline Thought**

By David S. Hagni

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Dr. Charles Holman

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# The Role of Women in Pauline Thought

For 20 years Jabin, a king of Canaan, had cruelly oppressed the Israelites. The atmosphere all across the land was thick with tension. As a raging sun hammered on armored soldiers, two of them broke into an argument with each other. Before the dispute could erupt into a full-scale physical fight, the commander ordered them to head for court held at the Palm Tree between Ramah and Bethel. Inside the court tent the two waited anxiously for the arrival of the Judge of Israel to settle their issue. At the appointed time the Judge entered. The men's jaws dropped. The Judge . . . *was a woman!* And her name was Deborah.<sup>i</sup>

Deborah is only one of many women used in extraordinary ways by God through the Old and New Testaments. The list could include Rahab, Ruth, Hannah, Esther, Mary, Phoebe, Lydia, Julia and others. Jesus' life and ministry felt the continued presence of women.<sup>ii</sup> As will be shown, the same is found true of the Apostle Paul. Even throughout early and modern church history, despite great hostility,<sup>iii</sup> women played crucial roles in the spread of the gospel and the vitality of the church.<sup>iv</sup> Yet, today there is great theological argument concerning the role of women as it relates to ministry in and through the church. A study of the role of women in Pauline thought -- in his letters to the Corinthians and to Timothy -- will help the church better understand, cooperate, release, and support the dynamic ministry of the Holy Spirit through women.

An examination of Paul's thoughts concerning the role of women in the church reveals three main passages of scripture that demand careful attention. The first for this study is found in I Corinthians 14:33-35. Paul says,

“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 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.” (NIV)

Unfortunately, the Greek is not of much help in this passage. The phrase “remain silent” is *sigao* meaning “be silent,” “stop talking” or “keep something secret.”<sup>v</sup> But some obvious questions must be addressed. Why was it shameful for women to speak in the congregation? Does speaking include praying, singing, teaching and prophesying? To which Old Testament law was Paul referring? Is this restriction relevant to all women through all ages?

One traditional approach assumes a literal understanding of 1 Corinthians 14 with its logical ramifications. Therefore, it is apparent women should not teach in any church setting; they should not teach in Sunday school, they must not sing in the choir and they should not serve as missionaries. However, if Paul meant “absolute silence” then women should also cease to praise and worship God verbally with other believers.<sup>vi</sup> And, if this were the case, then Paul's guidance to women praying and prophesying in church is nonsensical (1 Cor. 11:5).

Another traditional view of this passage is that men and women sat on opposite sides of the church and shouted questions at each other during the service. This view is weak in that it has no historical or scriptural evidence.<sup>vii</sup> Additionally, one of the radical liberal views holds that these verses do not even belong in the original letter to the

Corinthians, but was added later by a scribe as a paraphrase of 1 Timothy 2:11-12. This view does not do justice to the integrity and authority of the Word of God.

Before looking at specific elements of this passage, it is important to understand the historical context in which Paul wrote. Paul had worked with the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18), but after his departure the church was continually plagued with the confusing effects of division. In response to correspondence from the Corinthians, Paul answered questions as well as corrected disorders in relation to the church, the home and the world. Several times during the course of 1 Corinthians Paul used the words “now about . . .” and then proceeded to answer one of the Corinthians’ questions (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1:16:1). The passage under discussion is part of the section begun in chapter 12 concerning spiritual gifts.

A predominate concern of Paul in this section on spiritual gifts is the proper use of the gift of prophecy. Chapter 12 includes prophecy as one of the gifts of the Spirit (12:10). Paul qualifies prophecy as subordinate to the motive of love (13:2) but specifically emphasizes the importance of eagerly desiring its operation (14:1). Chapter 14 instructs on the proper use of the utterance gifts in both private and public situations. There is absolutely no hint in the context of these passages that this gift is limited to men in its function. In fact, earlier Paul explicitly *assumes* that women prophesy in church (1 Cor. 11:5). Did Paul contradict himself in saying that “women should remain silent in the churches . . . (and) are not allowed to speak” (14:34)?<sup>viii</sup>

As well as the overall context of 1 Corinthians and the sectional context of spiritual gifts, another concern is the immediate context of these verses in the latter part of chapter 12. From verses 26 through 40 Paul, uses the same Greek word (*sigao*) three

consecutive times in relation to something that needs to be silenced.<sup>ix</sup> In the first instance, the silencing refers to glossolalia (14:28). This does not mean that unknown tongues should be silenced for all time but only when there is no interpreter. The second instance is in relation to prophets speaking in order in public assembly (14:30). The idea, again, is not to suppress prophets from speaking forever but rather to establish order so the utterances are best appreciated.

The third occurrence of this Greek word is found in verse 34. Consistent with the first two occasions, Paul was not endorsing the general silencing of all women from speaking forever in church. He was evidently addressing a specific arrangement of the ancient church to bring order to bear upon the participants of the worship meeting. Unlike modern church services, the meeting of Christians during the first century resembled the Jewish synagogue in many ways.

According to *Adam Clark's Commentary on the Holy Bible*, it was an accepted practice for men in the synagogues to dialogue, challenge, and question the speaker but women were not traditionally granted this privilege.<sup>x</sup> But, with the influx of converts to the church at Corinth, many of the wives may not have had the opportunity to learn the basic doctrines of faith. Some suggest this may have been the setting in Corinth with women causing disorder with their outspoken challenges and questions during worship.<sup>xi</sup> Regardless of whether this is correct, there was certainly some type of distraction the women were instigating at the expense of orderly worship.

Keeping in mind the context of 1 Corinthians, its sectional content concerning prophecy, the use of the Greek word *sigao*, and the connection the church had with Jewish tradition, it is fair to conclude that Paul's statement about women keeping silent in

the church has strong cultural implications. Therefore, this statement is quite possibly limited to historical interest only. Whatever the cultural problem was that Paul was addressing, the greater principle of conducting church worship decently and orderly transcends cultural eras and *is* relevant today.<sup>xii</sup>

The other part of this passage referring to “the Law” (14:34) is even more troubling and perhaps requires a different line of interpretation. There is no law in the Old Testament that is even remotely close to the stipulation that women cannot speak in public assembly. In fact, the evidence demonstrates exactly the opposite. Miriam’s outburst in song (Ex. 15:20,21), the exhortation for *maidens* to praise the Lord (Ps. 148:12) and for *all* saints to give Him praise in the assembly (Ps. 149:1) are all examples of women with public voice. The “law” may be something other than the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament.

One explanation is that Paul is referring to rabbinical tradition that originally was handed down orally from one generation to the next – now known as the Talmud. In Mark 7:3 Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for holding so tightly to these traditions but neglecting the real commandments of God. These traditions had been elevated in importance equal and surpassing the word of God. Both Jesus (Matt. 15:3, 23:23,24) and Paul (Col. 2:16-23, Titus 1:14) resisted these human regulations that confused people from seeing God’s true will.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote, “The woman, says the law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive.”<sup>xiii</sup> The law Josephus referred to was not the Old Testament but the oral law.<sup>xiv</sup> Rabbinical Judaism, through its added interpretations and regulations, degraded and encouraged the subjugation of women.

Women were considered in the rabbinical law “pitchers full of filth”, “greedy . . . slothful . . . prone to steal.”<sup>xv</sup>

If it is true that Paul is not referring to Old Testament law in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 35, it would make a lot of sense that he is quoting from rabbinical law and actually refuting it in the verses that follow. Paul did not say he didn’t allow women to speak but simply that they are not allowed. This suggests that another authority was not permitting women to speak. Could that outside authority be any other than the rabbinical law that had such a horrid record of injustice toward women?

The above theory may have merit but does have some problems. One is that there is no scriptural precedent for Paul referring to rabbinical law. Second, Paul usually gives some linguistic clue that he is about to refute an error or answer a question. For example, in Romans he uses a rhetorical question to introduce his objection and then begins to answer his own question with “May it never be!” (Rom. 6:1,2). He doesn’t do this in 1 Cor. 14:34 and 35.

It seems more fitting that Paul was indeed speaking of the Law as incorporated in the entire Old Covenant.<sup>xvi</sup> In turn, what “the law says” (14:34) is in reference to submission – *not* necessarily in reference to women keeping silent. Keeping silent, in this case, is *the cultural expression* of the biblical principle of submission. Keeping silent is done out of respect to the husband and others present in the assembly and does not mean permanent abstinence from vocal expression in the assembly.<sup>xvii</sup> Submission is the general consensus of the Old Testament as seen, for example, in the lives of Abraham and Sarah (1 Peter 3:6). The key to 1 Corinthians 14 is found in the passage itself.

We don't have to guess what speaking Paul is opposed to. Paul describes the type of speaking he is against. In verse 35, after restricting women from speaking, he insists that women must *inquire of their own husbands at home*. This is the only "speaking" Paul makes reference to. Apparently, because of the great contrast between men's and women's education, many of the women found themselves lacking adequate knowledge to understand the teachings of scripture during worship.<sup>xviii</sup>

Instead of learning from their own husbands at home, they were *continually interrupting with uneducated questions* and wasting valuable time. Paul said this is "inappropriate" (14:35) – *not* inappropriate for women to speak, pray, prophesy, or teach in church – but inappropriate to interrupt the service at the expense of others who are trying to learn. Unnecessary interruption is the only form of speaking Paul was interested in silencing.

The cultural situation was a temporal problem for which Paul gave short- and long- range solutions. Short-range, the women were to stop interrupting the service; long-range, they were to do their homework at home by submitting to their husbands as their husbands taught them.<sup>xix</sup> The effect would benefit the whole church as the quality of learning would increase for the entire group. Paul was not trying to silence women from *every* type of speaking or teaching in church. He was only asking for the silencing of unnecessary interruption.

In this passage the solution to temporary cultural problems are seen. These temporary solutions were to be implemented in order to maintain the universal and permanent principle of orderly worship in the church. The next issue will discuss whether or not Paul forbade women to teach the word of God in church and to men.

1 Timothy 2:11-15 is a passage used as a proof-text for refusing women participation in the public teaching ministry of the word of God. It is also used to attack the legitimacy of women pastors. The text reads,

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.”  
(NIV).

At first glance, these verses sound like all women might as well forget about any heartfelt call to ministry that includes any form of public speaking where men are present. An example of the ridiculous logic that follows is that women must be restricted to teaching Sunday school where boys aren't real men yet – and even that must be done off the main sanctuary campus.

A traditional view of 1 Timothy 2 is that men are instructed to do the praying in church (2:8) and women are to dress modestly and stay quiet (2:9-12). Responsible and mature men only are qualified for leadership roles in the church. The appeal to Eve in Genesis is to point to the deficiencies in women's nature that leaves them more susceptible to deception than men.<sup>xx</sup> Therefore, Paul didn't want a woman to teach or hold responsible authority due to this tendency toward temptation.

A second view understands this passage in the larger context of the entire letter to Timothy.<sup>xxi</sup> It is clear from chapter one that Paul is concerned about deviant teachings that threatened to lead people astray in Ephesus (1:3,7). The teachers could have been women as denoted by the neuter noun in 1:3 (translated “men” NIV and “some” KJV). An early form of Gnosticism may have been the target of Paul's comments in the first eight verses of chapter 4 (“godless myths, old wives' tales,” 4:7). The higher form of

knowledge, so characteristic of later Gnosticism, may be referenced in 1 Timothy 6:20 and 21 as Paul warned Timothy of knowledge that can entice people away from the faith.

Possibly, according to this view, women were taking some of the lead roles in propagating these false doctrines. In 1 Timothy 5:11-15, some women in Ephesus had turned aside to follow Satan and were “saying things they ought not to” (5:13). Men and/or women teachers were teaching things they knew “nothing about” (1:6, 7), and Paul’s purpose was to help Timothy stop these women from having an impact on the church. To stop them from “promising godliness through good works” (2:10),<sup>xxii</sup> Paul commands them to learn quietly in submission.

In this view, the word for “have authority” (Gk. “*authentain*”) has sexual implications meaning that Paul does not allow female teachers to use sexual persuasion to influence their male students (2:12).<sup>xxiii</sup> Following, the comments concerning Eve were to counter Gnostic claims that Eve possessed special knowledge (2:13, 14). These theories are all very interesting, have elements of truth, but seem somewhat far-fetched. A better view relates the historical, contextual and linguistic meanings with each other in order to explain why Paul would apparently create such extreme restrictions against the role of women in ministry.

As in the context of 1 Corinthians, the culture in Ephesus also consisted of many uninformed and uneducated women – especially in Christian matters (1 Tim. 1:7).<sup>xxiv</sup> Women were not more prone to deception than men due to their nature but due to lack of information and education.<sup>xxv</sup> This is why Paul used the Genesis analogy of Eve to show that ignorance makes one vulnerable to deception and temptation (1 Tim. 13, 14). Eve didn’t have enough information and neither did the women in Ephesus. Therefore, Paul

insisted that the women “should learn” (2:11). He didn’t want the women to stay ignorant, but to learn and be brought up to speed. Paul was for the education and lifting up of women!

Paul, in the meantime, urged Timothy to stop these women from teaching until they had substantially grasped the truths of the Christian faith (2:11, 12). Doctrinally uninformed women (or men for that matter) could not be trusted to accurately pass on the truths of Scripture. However, once they submitted themselves (2:11) to understand scriptural doctrine, they then qualified to join the ranks of other commended women teachers such as Priscilla (a woman who taught Apollos, a man – Acts 18:26).<sup>xxvi</sup> It follows reasonably that Paul is not barring women from public ministry but is, in fact, doing just the opposite. The apostle is encouraging women to participate in ministry once they have acquired adequate levels of understanding.

A final consideration in Pauline thought concerning women is found in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16. A couple of brief comments are in order to show how the context of Paul’s statements in this passage relate with what he said in chapter 14 and 1 Timothy 2. The literal traditional view understands these verses to say that men are to exercise authority and take all leadership in the church. Women are to recognize this authority with their long hair or some type of head covering and passive cooperation.<sup>xxvii</sup>

This view misses the mark on at least two points. First, ministry is not adequately described with only the one word “authority.” The word “ministry” is the Greek word *deaconos* that most fundamentally means “service.”<sup>xxviii</sup> To extend Paul’s cultural guidelines in 1 Corinthians 11 in order to exclude women from service to God and His church is both unfair and unscholarly. Second, the traditionalist view does not take into

account verse 16 where Paul said these specific teachings were *synetheia* (Gk.) meaning “custom,” “practice,” or “habit” – not tradition, law, or doctrine.<sup>xxix</sup>

The point of the teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 is to refrain from bringing reproach on the gospel by overriding cultural customs. In other words, they were to keep gender distinctions in tact and, when possible, respect custom in order to avoid causing offense. The hair styles and head coverings were temporal expressions of the general principle of respect and honor. Respect, glory, and honor for God radiating through the husband and wife relationship were the goal. Even the much-touted idea of men being the “head” in the sense of subordinating their wives could have a better explanation (11:3).<sup>xxx</sup> Just as in chapter 14 and in 1 Timothy 2, these instructions were intended to address temporal cultural difficulties in order to maintain orderly worship.

In these three passages – 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and 1 Timothy 2 – it is apparent that the cultural problems of disrespect and biblically uninformed women were causing disorder in the churches. However, Paul definitely recognized the outstanding potential that would benefit the church if this problem could be remedied. Contrary to what many have thought, Paul did not discriminate against women but rather worked carefully toward their education and release into God-ordained ministries. Paul’s thoughts toward women in the church and ministry, as found in his letters to the Corinthians and Timothy, are the critical example for the modern church to follow in order to recapture effective leadership, growth, and vitality that gifted women have to offer.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Judges 4:1-5. This is an adaptation based on this passage of Old Testament scripture.

<sup>ii</sup> Arthur Frederick Ide, Jews, Jesus & Woman in the Apostolic Age (Mesquite, Texas: Ide House, Inc., 1984). Examples include Mary, Mary Magdalene, Martha, the sinner woman who anointed him (Luke 7:38).

<sup>iii</sup> Ambrose (AD 339-397) said, “Whoever does not believe is a woman, and she is still addressed with her physical sexual designation: for the woman who believes is elevated to male completeness and to a measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; then she no longer bears the worldly name of her physical sex . . .” Church History handout, Oral Roberts University.

<sup>iv</sup> Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, eds., Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). Examples include Macrina, Thecla, Lioba, Catherine of Siena, Phoebe Palmer, Hannah Smith.

<sup>v</sup> Bonnidell Clouse and Robert Clouse, eds., Women in Ministry: Four Views, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 33.

<sup>vi</sup> Charles Trombley, Who Said Women Can't Teach? (South Plainfield, New Jersey: Bridge Publishing, Inc., 1985), 4.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>viii</sup> This is an especially critical point to my Southern Baptist friends who consider prophecy to be mere preaching rather than supernatural utterance and simultaneously restrict women preaching. If prophecy is in fact preaching, then why does Paul instruct women in the orderly delivery of their preaching (prophecy) in 1 Cor. 11:5?

<sup>ix</sup> Judy Brown, Fourth Annual Azusa Street Lectures, (Virginia Beach, VA: Regent University, 1998), one videocassette.

<sup>x</sup> Adam Clark, Adam Clark's Commentary on the Bible, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1977), 1119-1120.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 1119-1120

<sup>xii</sup> Charles Laymon, The Interpreter's One-volume Commentary on the Bible, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 809,810

<sup>xiii</sup> Trombley, 41.

<sup>xiv</sup> Trombley, 29.

<sup>xv</sup> Trombley, 32.

<sup>xvi</sup> Kenneth Hagin, The Woman Question, (Tulsa: Rhema Bible Church, 1983), 14.

<sup>xvii</sup> Brown (videocassette).

<sup>xviii</sup> Craig S. Keener, Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 83.

<sup>xix</sup> Keener, 88.

<sup>xx</sup> Clouse, 36.

<sup>xxi</sup> Trombley, 164.

<sup>xxii</sup> Trombley, 167. I disagree with this exegesis.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Trombley, 174.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Keener, 112

<sup>xxv</sup> Keener, 112

<sup>xxvi</sup> Keener, 112

<sup>xxvii</sup> Clouse, 32.

<sup>xxviii</sup> W.E. Vines, Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming Revell Company, 1981), 74.

<sup>xxix</sup> Clouse, 55.

<sup>xxx</sup> Brown (videocassette). Headship can be seen as a source like the head of a river, not head as the typical authority figure. The Father does not dominate and humiliate Christ.