

God's High Calling for Women, Part 3

Scripture: 1 Timothy 2:11

Code: 54-16

INTRODUCTION

Catharine Beecher was the oldest child of a famous family in American history. One of her younger sisters was novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She grew up having a great love for children, finding joy in the duties of raising and caring for them. Her mother was very skilled in domestic handicraft, and spent a great amount of time teaching Catharine how to take care of the home.

When Catharine was sixteen her mother died and an aunt moved into the Beecher home to fill her place. The aunt was noted for her neatness and ability to manage the home in an orderly and economical way. Catharine's father eventually remarried, and her step-mother was an expert in domestic administration. Catharine, under the tutelage of those exemplary women, had learned a great deal about domestic life. She decided that she wanted to train women for their domestic responsibilities, so at the age of twenty-three she founded The Hartford Female Seminary. Its purpose was to train women to be lovers of their husbands and children, and keepers of the home. She and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, founded another seminary a few years later in Cincinnati, Ohio.

In 1869 they wrote a book entitled *The American Woman's Home* (N. Y. : J. B. Ford and Co.). In it they said, "Woman's profession embraces the care and nursing of the body in the critical periods of infancy and sickness, the training of the human mind in the most impressionable period of childhood. . . and most of the government and economies of the family state. These duties of woman are as sacred and important as any ordained to man; and yet no such advantages for preparation have been accorded her, nor is there any qualified body to certify the public that a woman is duly prepared to give proper instruction in her profession" (p. 14). It was their desire in founding the two schools to train women "not only to perform in the most approved manner all the manual employments of domestic life, but to honor and enjoy these duties" (pp. 14-15).

That quote shows how far we've come since that time. If anyone were to start a female seminary to train women today in domestic responsibility, they would become the instant laughing stock of the whole United States, if not most of the world. Training women to love their husbands, love their children, and keep the home would put a person in direct opposition to much of what's been happening in our society.

REVIEW

In 1 Timothy 2:9-15 Paul gives us a comprehensive treatment of the role of women in the church.

I. THE APPEARANCE OF WOMEN (v. 9a, c)

II. THE ATTITUDE OF WOMEN (v. 9b)

III. THE TESTIMONY OF WOMEN (v. 10)

IV. THE ROLE OF WOMEN (vv. 11-12)

"Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. "

A. In the Old Testament

B. In the New Testament

LESSON

C. In the Church

The Role of Women in Greek Society

The church at Ephesus existed in a city dominated by Greek culture and religion. According to William Barclay, "The place of women in Greek religion was low. The Temple of Aphrodite in Corinth had a thousand priestesses who were sacred prostitutes and every evening plied their trade on the city streets. The Temple of Diana in Ephesus had its hundreds of priestesses called the Melissae, which means the bees, whose function was the same. The respectable Greek woman led a very confined life. She lived in her own quarters into which no one but her husband came. She did not even appear at meals. She never at any time appeared on the street alone; she never went to any public assembly. The fact is that if in a Greek town Christian women had taken an active and a speaking part in its work, the Church would inevitably have gained the reputation of being the resort of loose women" (The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], p. 67).

Paul makes two points in verse 11 about women in the church: they are to learn in silence and in submission. The Greek word translated "silence" (h[ma]esuchia) means exactly that: silence. We'll have to determine its meaning from the context. The Greek word translated "subjection" is from hupotass[ma]o, which means "to line up under. " Women are not to be rebels; they're to get in line in

their proper place.

The woman's silence here has been misinterpreted in two ways. Those who believe women should be permitted to preach in the church interpret "silence" as a reference to a meek and quiet spirit. They claim that all this passage is saying is that women preachers or teachers are to have meek and quiet demeanors. Others go to the opposite extreme and insist that no woman should ever talk in church under any circumstances--not even to the person they're sitting next to. However Paul makes clear in verse 12 what he means by "silence": women are to be silent in the sense of not teaching or exercising over men in the church.

1. They are to learn in silence (1 Cor. 14)

1 Corinthians 14:34 echoes the thought of 1 Timothy 2:11. Paul writes, "Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. "

a) The reason for women's silence

The reason women are not to preach in the church has nothing to do with their psychological makeup or intellectual capabilities. The last phrase in 1 Corinthians 14:34 tells us women are not to teach in the church because God's law forbids it (cf. Gen. 3:16).

b) The meaning of women's silence

The context of 1 Corinthians 14 indicates that the silence Paul commanded was not intended to preclude women from speaking at all, but to keep them from speaking in tongues and prophesying in the church.

The Spectacle of the Oracle

Across the Gulf of Corinth was the city of Delphi. At the head of the religious structure in Delphi was a woman known as the Pythia, or the oracle of Delphi. To qualify for the office a woman had to be a young virgin but later married women over fifty were preferred, but they had to dress like maidens. Basically this priestess was a medium in contact with demon spirits. Those who desired to know what the future held for them would consult her.

A person desiring to consult the oracle would first have to sacrifice an animal while a few attendant priestesses evaluated the omens. If they were favorable, the man (no women were allowed to consult the oracle) was permitted to enter the inner shrine. After entering he would write his request on a tablet (archaeologists have excavated the shrine area and found some of those tablets still intact), which would then probably have been read to the Pythia. She sat on a tripod, allegedly over a chasm from which a mystic vapor from the ground arose. Before taking her seat, she had to drink water from the prophetic stream called Kassotis, and eat sacred laurel leaves. In response to the question on the tablet, she would utter incoherent sounds that would be interpreted (often in perfect hexameter verse) by a male prophet who stood nearby. The interpretation, which was often obscure and variable, left the inquirer more mystified than when he came.

All that had a negative impact on the church at Corinth. Some people came into the Corinthian assembly and uttered similar ecstatic speech, supposedly in the power of the Holy Spirit. That led to

chaos in the Corinthian church, the true gifts of speaking in tongues and prophesying being hopelessly confused with Satanic counterfeits.

(1) The corruption

At Corinth, as in Ephesus, were women who were flaunting their sexuality. Perhaps being influenced by the Delphic religion (which was headed by a woman) they sought prominent positions in the Corinthian church by abusing the gifts of speaking in tongues and prophesying.

(2) The correction

In response to that problem Paul wrote, "How is it, then, brethren? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Cor. 14:26). He went on to tell them that no more than two or three were to speak in tongues, and never without an interpreter present. Only two or three prophets were to speak, and others were to evaluate them to see if they spoke the truth (vv. 27-29). Paul's point was that God is not the author of confusion (v. 33). Finally, Paul instructed the women to keep silent (v. 34). They were not to speak in tongues or prophesy in the public assembly of the church.

First Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 tell us that when the church comes together, women are not to speak in tongues, prophesy, or teach the Word of God. When the church comes together it is the appointed men who are to do the talking.

(3) The concession

That women are precluded from speaking authoritatively in the church assembly doesn't mean they can never speak God's truth. God used women such as Miriam (Ex. 15:20-21), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-22), and Anna (Luke 2:36-38) to speak for Him on occasion. Paul dialogued with various churches and synagogues during his missionary journeys, answering questions from women as well as men (cf Acts 17:2-4). I think there is a time and place as well for women to publicly offer a testimony of praise to the Lord. I don't think Paul is saying they can never do that. What he is forbidding is women taking on the leadership roles in the church.

2. They are to learn in subjection (1 Cor. 11)

In 1 Corinthians 11:3 Paul says, "The head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." That verse teaches that women are to be in submission to men in the sense that they are not to usurp the role of leadership in the church, which belongs to qualified men only.

a) The source of subjection

No one argues that the head of every man is Christ. There is no Christians' Liberation movement demanding equality with Christ! Also, everyone understands that God the Father is the head of Christ. Philippians 2:5-8 teaches that Christ took upon Himself the form of a servant during His Incarnation. Since Christ is the head of the man, and the Father is the head of Christ, why do we debate about whether the man is the head of the woman?

b) The symbols of subjection

In Corinth it was customary for women to cover their heads. That was how a woman displayed her modesty. It was a sign that she was committed to a man and not available. Men, on the other hand, had their heads uncovered. That was a mark of their masculinity. Somehow in the Corinthian church those cultural signals were getting inverted: women were praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered, thus identifying themselves with the women's liberation movement in Corinth. The

men, perhaps because of a Jewish influence, were covering their heads while praying. Paul rebukes the men for doing that in verse 4: "Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoreth his head. " Does that mean it's a sin to put something on your head when you pray? No, not unless your culture perceives that as something feminine. In verse 5 he rebukes the women: "Every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head, for that is even all one as if she were shaved. " (A shaved head was a symbol of shame in Paul's day.) Paul was saying we should identify with our society's symbols of masculinity and femininity unless they violate Scripture or God's design for morality. Such symbols in our society can be readily discerned. We can tell a woman who looks like a woman from one who looks like she is rebelling against everything that womanhood stands for. We can look at a man and tell by the way he dresses and carries himself if he is effeminate and denying the symbols of masculinity.

Does 1 Corinthians 11:5 Permit Women Preachers?

Some people teach that the praying and prophesying the women were doing in 1 Corinthians 11:5 took place during the worship service. However the text doesn't say that. Perhaps Paul is talking of prayer and prophecy in general. It's not until verse 18 that Paul first speaks in this chapter of the formal gathering of the church: "First of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there are divisions among you. " Prior to verse 18 he apparently hasn't been talking about the worship service.

In verse 5 Paul is perhaps speaking of women praying and sharing the Word of God in a home Bible study or family prayer time. His point is that whenever Christians get together, women are to maintain the decorum of submission, and men that of headship. If a woman is veiled when she prays or speaks the Word of God, she attests to her womanhood, and affirms her role of submission to her husband. She is acknowledging that man is the image and glory of God and she is the glory of man (v. 7). Man in a sense is the sun and woman is the moon that reflects the light of the sun. Man is symbolic of the glorious dominion of God, and woman is symbolic of the one who follows.

c) The significance of subjection

God has designed all of human life to revolve around relationships. Everyone is involved in a relationship, and within those relationships are differing roles. However in our society the emphasis is not on relationships, but on individuality. People focus on their rights and seek to satisfy themselves. In such a society there's a tendency to view everyone as having equal roles. But when women refuse to accept their God-ordained roles in the church and family, they undermine the foundational design of God for those institutions. The stability of society is at stake.

Some Practical Considerations

1. When can women proclaim the Word of God?

At any time and at any place, except when the church comes together for the worship service. Anna spoke the truth (Luke 1:36-38). Mary spoke it in her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). Women, I pray to God that you proclaim His truth over and over again for as long as you live!

2. Can women share what they've learned at Bible studies?

Yes. In the right environment, under the direction of the leadership of that study, there is nothing wrong with a woman sharing what the Spirit of God has taught her out of the Word.

3. Can women pray in public if men are present?

Yes again. Acts 1:13-14 describes a prayer meeting where the disciples of Jesus as well as several women were present. There is a time and a place when it is perfectly appropriate for a woman to pray in public.

When Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:11, "Let the woman learn in silence," he means that women are not to teach during the official meeting of the church. The responsibility of being the preacher, the teacher, or the one who leads in prayer is a role ordained for men.

Focusing on the Facts

1. The city of Ephesus was dominated by _____ culture and religion.
2. True or False: Women enjoyed a great amount of personal freedom in Greek society, often taking an active role in the public assemblies.
3. What two points does Paul make in 1 Timothy 2:11 about the role of women in the church?
4. True or False: Paul's command that women keep silent in church means that a woman is not to speak in church under any circumstances.
5. What is the reason women are not permitted to teach in the church?
6. Describe the influence the Delphic religion had on the Corinthian church.
7. How did Paul instruct the Corinthians to correct the problems in their church?
8. Why was it wrong for the Corinthian men to pray with their heads covered?

9. Does 1 Corinthians 11:5 teach that women can proclaim God's Word in the church service? Support your answer.

10. Why is it such a serious matter for women to reject the roles God has designed for them in the family and the church?

11. True or False: It is fine for women to pray when men are present. Support your answer from Scripture.

Pondering the Principles

1. Some women in the Ephesian and Corinthian churches were more concerned with their rights than their responsibilities to God and the church. What about you? Is your focus on getting or giving? Do you more frequently demand your rights or fulfill your responsibilities? Remember that Jesus came not "to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:28, NASB). If your focus has gradually changed from ministering to the needs of others to looking out for your own rights, you can help get it back where it belongs by memorizing Philippians 2:3-4.

2. We've learned in this chapter that both men and women can (under the right circumstances) proclaim God's truth. Do you regularly look for opportunities to share the truths of Scripture with your friends? your neighbors? your spouse? your children? To share the truths of the Bible we must first learn them ourselves. That requires constant study. If you aren't regularly studying Scripture, make a commitment to the Lord to begin tomorrow.

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