

# **THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH**

e find ourselves in an awkward position today. The Holy Spirit is obviously gifting and using women in unprecedented ways. Their contribution to the success of missions, evangelism, and every area of local church ministry is unmistakable; yet the Scriptures have two passages that seem to limit their ministry around or with men. The active role of women has always been accepted in certain denominations; but in many conservative circles, the role of women in the church is still a matter of confusion.

We cannot ignore the Word of God, nor change our position on biblical issues to stay in step with our fickle society. On the other hand, true Bible study requires that we look at verses in their immediate context as well as the greater context of the entire Bible. New Testament truths should have their roots in the Old Testament. When God plans on changing dispensations, He typically tells His Old Testament prophets in advance (Amos 3:7). An example of this is how Jeremiah prophesied of the New Covenant (chapter 31).

Bible scholars have taught for years on the different dispensations or covenants, and how each administration had special requirements. Even the Jews today who do not receive the New Testament have set aside the practice of animal sacrifice. What is a clear change in God's dealing with man for one student of the Word can be considered heresy by another person! Consider the group that insists that their women cover their heads and outlaw the use of automobiles, but the men wear pants – something unheard of in Bible days!

We see with partial vision, and at best, we have incomplete knowledge (1 Corinthians 13:9-12). Jesus said that there were things He needed to teach His followers: *I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now* (John 16:12). These things being true, why do some folks get feisty and stubborn over the partial, incomplete truth they have and close themselves off from gaining God's bigger picture?

Sometimes I have caught myself being like a blind man arguing over the color of flowers! I offer you not the final word on the place of women in the church today, but one man's opinion of how the

pieces of the puzzle fit together. If you disagree, show me how to fit the pieces together better!

Our dilemma can have an answer that's right under our nose. I want us to consider the role of women in the local church from three perspectives: times of transition, cultural issues, and from the clear teaching of Scripture. I would never want to be accused of taking away from the Word or adding to it, and I don't believe I am, but you be the judge. Let me show you what I see in the Word, and you draw your own conclusions. After all, we will only be judged for what we believe and teach, not what someone else says. And please allow me to quickly add, that when the Bible says something is right or wrong, that settles it. I do not want to argue with God or try to get away with anything just because modern man has once again changed his opinion. But, the science of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) requires we do a little more than make superficial responses to the Living and Abiding Word of God.

## TRANSITIONS

The book of Acts is transitional. It records the activities of believers as they made adjustment from Old Testament regimentation to New Testament life and freedom. There are four major areas where the early church struggled with transitions, and I believe the role of women can be added as an obvious fifth.

Let's think a bit about what Peter, John, Paul and the others had to deal with. The first thing that hit the early believers right between the eyes was the matter of Gentiles being saved. They knew anyone could be saved if they first became a proselyte to the Jewish faith, but to sidestep protocol was hard to receive. When the church leaders in Jerusalem heard that the half-breeds in Samaria were being saved and baptized, they sent Peter and John up to straighten things out! Acts chapter eight records how the Holy Spirit proved to them that half- Jews could be saved without being proselytes.

We Gentiles may be shocked at Peter's slowness in Acts chapter ten, when God had to give him a vision to get across the point that we heathens can be born again directly, without the having to become a Jewish proselyte first! God substantiated His new way of doing business by baptizing the household of Cornelius with His Spirit even before they were water baptized. We humans

learn slow and change even slower.

The first church council (Acts 15) was called to look further into this "easy believe-ism" being preached by some. When all the evidence was listed, everyone had to agree with God, that it was OK for Him to save Gentiles without them first becoming proselytes to Judaism. What a transition. Apparently this decision was still being contested by many in Jerusalem as late as Acts 21-25.

A second transition that goes along with this is the rite of circumcision. In Acts 16:3, Paul had Timothy circumcised before taking him along on his missionary journey. In Galatians 5:2-6, Paul says that having a gentile believer circumcised could cause him to fall from grace. In Acts 21:29, we see Paul with another gentile traveling companion, Trophimus, a believer, who was not circumcised. Did Paul do some changing or what? These transitions were not easy on anyone, but the Spirit led the way. Firm convictions and even Scriptural precedents were being transformed as the old faded into the new.

The third transition is the most obvious – sacrifice. Jesus became the fulfillment for all the Old Testament sacrifices. Who would doubt that? Yet, we see Paul offering sacrifice for purification in Acts 21:24-26. The writer of Hebrews says, "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (10:10)." Why didn't Paul see this and refuse to offer a sacrifice? Why don't **we** see everything right away? We learn slow and change slow. What is obvious to us with our present perspective was not so clear to those in the middle of the transition time.

What day will we go to church? The fourth transition is not clear in church history. The excitement of Pentecost (Acts 2) resulted in the newly filled believers having church every day! They went to the temple for daily prayer, and would always go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. But we see at least a sliver of transition in Acts 20:6,7. Paul was in Troas for seven days. Which day did he pick to have church? The first day of the week. What does this prove? Nothing. We see a transition. In Romans 14 Paul flatly says it doesn't matter which day of the week you keep as sacred, just as long as you do it as unto God. He would have been stoned for writing that in Old Testament times. In Colossians 2:16 he warns against observing not only the Sabbath but the feasts! This verse must have caused some heavy breathing by the conservatives of his day. They were in a period of reconstruction.

Is the role of women another transition? Do we see any hints of this in the Word? I think so. In Acts 18:2 we meet Aquila, a native of Pontus, a Jew who was thrown out of Rome by Claudius. As was customary, his wife was referred to after he was introduced. Women were not esteemed very highly. Tradition has it that the Jewish men would thank God that they were not born a woman or a Gentile. That sounds a mite bigoted in today's enlightened world, doesn't it? After nearly two years spent working with this husband/wife team, Luke, the author of Acts, begins listing the wife's name first (18:18, 26). Does that prove anything? Probably not, but it is a break with the Old Testament male mind-set. Perhaps Priscilla was the one who did more of the ministry. Is that a sin? Only if there hasn't been a transition in the role of women under the New Covenant.

With each of the four transitions, there is a Scriptural basis we can stand on; otherwise, we would be taking away from the Word without warrant. We would be in big trouble. If God gives us a Scriptural basis for a transition, then we can relax, and flow with it (the best our slow-to-change minds will allow). Is there a biblical basis for the change of roles for women? Consider this verse in Galatians 3:28:

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

There were still slaves after Paul wrote this verse. He's not saying slavery will disappear along with gender differences. We still need different baptismal changing rooms. We know what he's saying. Women are no longer to be lumped together with the outcasts. They, along with Gentiles and slaves, must be treated in the Body of Christ as equals! This transition would make the rabbis roll over in their graves. If you've seen the movie *Fiddler On The Roof*, you've laughed at the old fashioned mentality toward women. Well, many believers better scoot over for Tavia. The average church today is still treating women the same Old Testament way!

Let's look at this issue from a second perspective...

## CULTURE

All Scripture is inspired (2 Timothy 3:16) but all Scripture doesn't have the

same weight. The words of liars (such as Satan) are recorded just as they were spoken, but they have no magical properties because they are included in the Bible. We put different weight on verses in the New Testament because the coming of Jesus Christ has effected the Old Testament. We can not be lazy in this matter. We have to examine the context of verses and do a little thinking. A shyster could quote the lies of a sinner from the Bible and give you the reference. Would you go ahead and turn your life savings over to such a person without checking the context of the verse he quoted? I hope not. Would you tell women to shut up in church and sit on their spiritual gifts without checking out the context of the verses used to silence women? I hope not.

The Apostle Paul refers to several cultural issues in the first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter seven he toggles back and forth between saying “these are my feelings,” and “this is a command from the Lord.” In chapter eleven He says it's a disgrace for women to pray with their heads uncovered. Is it still that way today? Some places. I find it almost amusing to see the borderline compliance in one denomination. Their women must have a small see-through doily on the very back of their heads. This probably would not have been sufficient for Corinth! Paul reveals his cultural bias in 1 Corinthians 11:16:

*But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.*

Do the churches of God today have any other practices? Paul says in verse 14 that even nature shows us that it's a dishonor for a man to have long hair. I wonder if Geronomo or some of the Apache warriors would agree with Paul's cultural statement? I'm sure the hippies and "long hairs" of today would say times have changed. And, wasn't John the Baptist a “long-haired” Nazirite?

Let's jump right into one of the toughest passages on the place of women in church, 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35:

*Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the law also says...for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.*

Wow, this sounds strong. Is there any cultural bias here? Does not the word "improper" sound like a cultural motif or moray? What law is Paul referring to? Even if he were referring to the Old Testament Law, we would have to ask, "How did the ministry of Jesus effect this?" But, I ask you to show me

where Paul got this reference? I've searched every commentary I could, and I have yet to find any place where this is recorded in Scripture. I thought at first that I'd missed the Old Testament verse Paul was talking about. Folks, it's not a Bible precept—it was a cultural law, known to all in Corinth. Is it still improper for women to walk around with their head uncovered in public? Must they still cover their face and walk behind their husband? Are they still not allowed privileges accorded to real citizens, such as voting, owning property, etc.? Times have changed, and so has the place of women. I firmly believe that if Paul were alive today, he would write differently.

Some people have made nasty remarks about noisy women in Pentecostal churches. They had better be careful. If such "noisy women" are obeying the Holy Spirit in spite of cultural traditions, then to judge them is to be found fighting against God. Jesus didn't say very nice things to the Pharisees who claimed He was casting out demons by Satan's power. He warned of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Could not those who cast aspersions on women who step out in spiritual gifts, in obedience to the Lord, be guilty of the same sin?

Paul closes off this chapter by saying these things are the Lord's commandments (verse 37); however, the "therefore" that begins verse 39 points his remark toward the two main issues he dealt with in chapter fourteen...

*Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophecy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues.*

The bottom line is, what does the Lord think about all this? You won't have to give an account for what I think, but if you buy someone's bias without asking the Lord, you may be in trouble. He's still in charge. If He says that the women are to shut up, okay, but if you quench the Spirit because of your bias, then you're in big trouble!

Now to the only other Scripture that tells women to be silent in church: 1 Timothy 2:11, 12...

*Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.*

Did you catch the words, "But I do not allow"? Again, we see where Paul is

coming from. Remember, this is the same man who offered sacrifice in Acts 21 but later condemned going back under the Law. He was growing. He didn't see everything clearly. Paul wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and recorded exactly what the Lord told Him to write. The Lord expects us to check with Him to sift out obviously cultural remarks, under His supervision. He had Daniel write some things that would be hidden from believers in earlier ages (Daniel 12:9). We must listen for Him to tell **what** applies to us and **how** it applies. We still see through a glass darkly. We still need the Lord's interpretation today. My opinion and your opinion, nice as they are, will not set people free. What is the mind of the Spirit? Did Jesus remove the barriers (Ephesians 2:11-15; Colossians 3:11, Galatians 3:28), including gender?

Now for the third area:

### SCRIPTURE

Enough of the defensive. We need to see some of what the Lord has said He will do in the latter days.

*How long will you go here and there, O faithless daughter? For the Lord has created a new thing in the earth—a woman will encompass a man.*

*Jeremiah 31:22*

The setting for this verse is in Jeremiah 30:24, where the prophet clearly says this is for the latter days. The disease of "Macho-man-itis" has infected many males today. What big, rough, tough men will do to prove their strength is unbelievable; one of which is to quench the Holy Spirit by not using the gifts He gave them. I see fewer women suffering from this malady. Sure, gals have problems. They are emotional, but for the most part, they have something to teach us men about being sensitive to the Lord. I wonder if that's why Jeremiah says they will encompass men in the latter days.

We see few women being used of God in the Old Covenant, probably because the dirty old men couldn't have contained their lusts without the power of the New Covenant. The prophet Joel looked forward to when God would pour His Spirit out upon the women as well as the men (Joel 2:28, 29). This began in Acts 2 and I personally believe it has grown. The church age is one that reveals an increasing place for women in ministerial roles.



Some Saints feel that New Testament prophecy is preaching. If I asked them if women were allowed to preach today, I can predict their reply. Notice what the Lord tells us on the day of Pentecost:

*Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.* Acts 2:18 (NIV)

Women prophesy? Why doesn't Paul talk about this verse when he says what he does and doesn't allow? He was living in the time of the greatest transitions mankind has ever tried to navigate! To give Paul credit, he does mention women prophesying *...And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved* (1 Corinthians 11:5 NIV). He expected women to prophesy. Some say that women can prophesy, but only with other women. Why then have their heads covered? Why make a distinction if there is neither male or female in spiritual matters?

In the New Testament we see women rising to places of leadership. Romans 16 list several women in leadership situations. Was the Epistle of Second John written to a woman pastor? You debate that one. A woman is referred to in verses one and five. My question is, where would Christianity be today without the participation of spirit-filled women? Where would missions be? Where would Sunday School be? Who would pay the churches bills? Where would the Pentecostal movement be? I've heard anti-Pentecostal comments that if the women would shut up in our churches, the Pentecostal movement would die overnight. They're absolutely right. We'd be just as dead as they are with their silent women sitting on their spiritual gifts!

As Pentecostals, our desire should be to give maximum freedom to the Holy Spirit. I've seen Him heal deaf ears, open blinded eyes, lengthen short legs, heal cancers, and save a bunch of disbelieving sinners! I believe in the Pentecostal movement, and I think the Pentecostal movement needs to say a big thank you to the women who have caught a bunch of guff, but still obeyed the Lord!

## CONCLUSION

No woman has the right to hide behind male chauvinistic interpretations of cultural Bible verses and to thus rob the Body of Christ of spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit. This same Holy Spirit is the One who wrote, "In Christ there is neither male nor female."

No believer, male or female, has the right to be loud, bossy, flashy,

arrogant, pushy, crude, immodest, etc. We are all to be meek and seek to live a quiet life (1 Thessalonians 4:11), in submission to one another (Ephesians 5:21).

It's time to turn our thinking caps on. Women will always be different from men. Women give to the church a flavor God designed to be produced only by man's helpmeet. Recall, it's not good for men to live without them (Genesis 2:18). I think the role of women has been limited because of the lustful nature of men. Until the inner transformation produced by the Holy Spirit, this problem was great. Look at David's mess, and even Solomon's (wasn't he the wisest one at that time?). Even today, women must be very careful around most men because of the lust of the flesh and lack of discipline. God made women to be a fantastic helpmeet—maybe a little bit too much so! Some guys haven't learned how to do with just one! Women, if you see any wisdom in this, please respond appropriately. Be modest and be controlled by the Spirit.

Yes, women are to be submissive to their husbands. And husbands are likewise to treat their wives as Christ treats the church, preferring her over his own body! The flow of authority is clear in the Word, but this does not mean that women are of no value to the church. What is the place of women in the Body of Christ today? You will have to give an account to God for your opinion. I've shared with you what I feel the Lord has shared with me. You be the judge.

Unless otherwise noted all verses are from the New American Standard Bible. Verses marked NIV are from the New International Version of the Holy Bible.

Please send your comments and insights:

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