

Does The Role Of Women Matter?

Introduction. In December, 2014, David Lipscomb University began supporting a female student to do a preaching internship at the Fourth Avenue Church of Christ in Franklin, TN. As you might imagine, the news provoked a tremendous reaction among members of churches of Christ, with many of them immediately denouncing the move.

Unfortunately, the movement to increase the role of women in the church was inevitable. Along with this intern in Tennessee, churches of Christ have appointed women as deacons and elders, and have had them teaching in assemblies of men and women, and assisting in song services and serving at the Lord's table for a long time.

Increasing women's roles in the church has mimicked what has happened for several decades in America. Women are serving as CEOs of several companies and at least three women have served as Secretary of State. It is not surprising that there would be pressure to give women ever more prevalent roles in the work and worship of the church. All of this leads us to consider whether it matters what role women play.

I. Women Played Important Roles

- A. There is no doubt that women played an important role in the life of Christ, beginning with Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary, all of whom are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5-6, 16). The prophetess Anna praised the Redeemer when Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple as they offered the required sacrifice (Luke 2:36-38). Our Lord healed Peter's mother-in-law, raised the widow of Nain's son, cleansed Mary Magdalene of evil spirits, and raised Jarius' daughter from the dead (Mark 1:29-31; Luke 7:11-15; 8:2, 40-56). Jesus taught the Samaritan woman at the well, forgave the sinful woman who wiped His feet with her hair, and praised Mary for choosing the better part by listening to Him teach while Martha was busy serving (John 4:4-42; Luke 7:36-50; 10:38-42). The Master used the widow who gave her only two mites as a powerful example of giving (Luke 21:1-4). Jesus made sure John was going to be responsible for the needs of His mother (John 19:25-27). Women were near the cross while the Savior was being crucified; they were the first to the tomb and the first to see the resurrected Lord (Matthew 27:55-56; 28:1-10). It is apparent that Jesus had an excellent relationship with a number of women, yet He did not choose a single woman to be an apostle (Matthew 10:1-14).
- B. Women also played significant roles in the Lord's body, the church. Priscilla was at Aquila's side when they taught Apollos (Acts 18:26), and the church met in their house (Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19). The church also met in the home of Mary (Acts 12:12). Phoebe was a servant of the church in Cenchrea who took care of those in need, even Paul, and she delivered the letter to Rome (Romans 16:1-2). The apostle sent a special greeting to Mary (Romans 16:6). Older women should teach younger women to love their husbands and children (Titus 2:3-5). Mothers are entrusted with the vital work of caring for their homes and children (1 Timothy 5:14). These were all important works, yet Luke used a masculine term to describe the ones appointed by Paul and Barnabas to serve as elders (Acts 14:23).

- C. Discovering the role of women and any restrictions that might be placed on them will require looking into Paul's instructions to the Corinthians and to Timothy.

II. Paul's Instruction To The Corinthians

- A. The brethren at Corinth wrote Paul a series of questions which he began to answer in 1 Corinthians 7:1. Questions regarding spiritual gifts are handled in chapters 12-14. Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14 all deal with matters in the assembly (19, 23, 26, 33-35).
 - 1. The same word is used to describe God's people in the wilderness (Acts 7:38), a mob (19:32), and a lawful, public gathering (19:39).
 - 2. The apostle makes it clear the type assembly of which he is speaking when he says, "as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:33b).
- B. The picture in the Corinthian assembly is one of overexcitement and confusion.
 - 1. Using the gift of tongues, which they considered a high mark of spirituality, one person would pour out a stream of words unintelligible to the audience, another person would join in, and still another, until several were speaking at once. Men and women alike were lifting up their voices. Confusion reigned.
 - 2. Paul told tongue speakers to "keep silent" when no interpreter was present in the assembly (14:28). He similarly instructed one who was prophesying to "keep silent" when something was revealed to another (14:30). Women were also told to "keep silent" in the churches (14:34), which defines where the prohibition applies. All of these instructions had the ultimate goal of making the assembly edifying to the body (14:3-6, 9, 12, 19, 26, 31, 40).
- C. Paul directed the wives of the men prophesying under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to "keep silent" in the assembly, giving two reasons for this rule.
 - 1. Paul indicated the law would require women to be in subjection.
 - a) "As also saith the law" goes back to Genesis 3:16, the only "law" in the Old Testament saying that "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."
 - b) Here the headship and rulership of the husband over the wife is established, and it is reinforced in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 11:2-4; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Peter 3:1-7).
 - 2. Paul said women could "ask their own husbands at home," with "home" being a metonymy for outside the assembly.
 - a) Paul meant husbands could answer questions after a service had concluded. A similar point is found in 11:34 when Paul spoke about "eating at home" — he was not forbidding Christians from eating on a public park, a restaurant, etc.
 - b) Paul describes a woman speaking in the assembly as a "shame," which has also been translated as "improper" and "disgraceful." The word is only used by Paul three other times (cp. 11:6; Ephesians 5:11-12; Titus 1:11).

III. Paul's Instruction To Timothy

- A. Paul's instructions to the church of God in Corinth are consistent with his directions to Timothy as he worked with the church in Ephesus. Paul declares that he is writing Timothy so he might know how to behave in the church of God

(1 Timothy 3:15). Paul opens chapter 2 with instructions for prayers to be offered for all men, particularly those in authority. In v. 8, Paul says that men are to do the praying. If Paul is not speaking of the public worship, why does he say that the males are to do the praying? But he says also that the males are to pray in every place. If the context of 1 Timothy 2 is not the public assembly, what place is there for women to pray?

- B. Just as the men should be prepared for worship, so should the women prepare themselves (1 Timothy 2:9-10). She should wear clothes showing respect for God and those around her, which is the idea behind “shamefacedness.” “Moderation” suggests simplicity with self-restraint. Her clothing and hairstyle should not be filled with worldly trappings that call attention to her wealth. Instead, her godly actions should stand out to all who meet her. Her desire to be like God will shine through in good works done to His glory (Matthew 5:13-16).
- C. The apostle’s directions about “silence” are better understood in the ASV, which has Paul saying a woman should learn in “quietness” (cp. 2 Thessalonians 3:12).
 - 1. She is not forbidden to use her voice at all, but must avoid boisterous conduct that would lead to confusion in worship and prevent those assembled from being edified. She can join in the singing and even participate in the classes, as long as she subjects herself in obedience to God’s order of authority.
 - 2. Titus 2:1-5 makes it clear Paul is not opposing all teaching by women. Instead, we must note it is teaching men which would require her to exercise authority or dominion, or be the master or ruler over men, which is forbidden. Since Paul began in v. 8 with directions relating especially to prayer in public places, we assume these directions also are particularly for worship (1 Timothy 2:11-12). The men are to speak the prayers and the lessons which the women are to learn, which means “to receive instruction and understanding from another.”
- D. Paul went on to give scriptural reasons for the instructions regarding women and worship (1 Timothy 2:13-14).
 - 1. First, God’s order of creation was man first and woman second (cp. 1 Corinthians 11:3, 9).
 - 2. Second, he referred to the sin committed in the Garden of Eden. Both Adam and Eve sinned, but Paul tells us the woman was deceived (Genesis 3:1-7). Paul is not suggesting the woman’s sin was worse than the man’s, but the fact that she was deceived suggests she could be more easily led astray.
- E. The reference to woman being saved in childbearing in v. 15 has perplexed commentators, but the most natural explanation is that although the woman was the first to fall into sin, it was woman who delivered the Savior into the world and she, and all other women (“they”) will be saved if they continue in charity, holiness, and sobriety.

IV. Women Do Have A Role In The Church

- A. One needs only look at the qualifications for a widow the church may support to recognize that women have a role in the church. Paul says she should be known for her good works. This would include but not be limited to rearing children, receiving guests into her home and giving them lodging, washing the feet of

weary saints after their day's travel, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving water to the thirsty, and visiting the sick and those in prison (Matthew 25:31-46; Acts 9:36-43; 16:15; 1 Timothy 5:9-10).

- B. Elderly women were to be taught by Titus to train younger women (Titus 2:3-5). They were to call them to the responsibility of loving their husbands and children. They were also to teach the younger women to be in control of themselves, pure, workers at home, kind, and be in subjection to their own husbands.
- C. Women by nature have a role that assures their identity. This role of women extends to all of their life at home, as Paul's praise of Lois and Eunice, grandmother and mother of Timothy, would indicate (2 Timothy 1:5). These two women had taught this fine young preacher the scriptures during his childhood. The inspired words of the Old Testament had pointed him to the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and perfectly adapted him for the task of performing every good work (3:14-17).

Conclusion. Women serving in important positions in industry and government have given rise to questions about their role in the church. But we need to respect the instructions of the New Testament, and not have so narrow a view of godly service that we fall into the trap of thinking that usefulness only equates to participating in the public worship assembly.

Women played important roles in the life of our Lord and the early church, but those were not public roles. I am so very thankful for my heritage of godly women. I celebrate their faith, meekness, submission, and obedience. I celebrate them for being Christian women, wives, and mothers. They did not think this a lesser role, but a role that glorified their place and talents in the overall scheme of God's kingdom.