

SHOULD A WOMAN TEACH IN CHURCH?

by Ray C. Stedman

The social movements of every age seem to be used by God to force Christians to re-examine (and clarify) their understanding of what the Scriptures teach. Painful as they may be, every such re-examination results ultimately in stronger and clearer statements on the subjects in question than the church has ever had before. This is certainly the case in the matter of the woman's role in the church. The secular Women's Liberation movement is forcing church leaders everywhere to distinguish carefully between attitudes toward women derived from customs and traditions of the past (often strongly macho-dominated) and what the Bible actually teaches and what the early church actually did.

In the scope of this brief article it is not possible to answer all the questions which are being raised today. But we would like to examine the specific question being asked by many Christians today: Should a woman teach the Scriptures, and especially, should she teach men or when men are present?

We can say at once that the New Testament clearly indicates that both men and women receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit without distinction in regard to sex. Included among these is the gift of teaching, and other related gifts, such as prophesying (basically, preaching), exhortation, and the word of wisdom and of knowledge. Women prophets are referred to both in the Old and New Testaments, and older women are instructed by the Apostle Paul to teach the younger women.

A somewhat oblique reference in First Corinthians 11:4-5 suggests that both men and women were free to pray or prophesy in the open meeting of the church, though the woman must do it in such a way as to indicate that she recognizes the headship role of her husband. If she does so, there seems to be no objection to the fact that men would be present in the congregation, or any limitation placed on her for that reason. From the viewpoint of spiritual gifts it seems clear that "in Christ there is neither male nor female" {cf, Gal 3:28c} and God expects every woman to have a ministry as much as he expects every male to have one.

Though the ministry of women in the New Testament churches is not prominent in the record, nevertheless, there are certain references which indicate they were frequently and widely used in various capacities. Almost all commentators agree that Priscilla and her husband Aquila were side-by-side companions of the Apostle Paul in his work both in Corinth and in Ephesus, and that of the two, Priscilla was the more gifted and capable teacher, since her name is most often listed first. They were, together, the instructors of the mighty Apollos in his early preaching efforts. Here is a clear-cut case of a knowledgeable woman being used in the teaching of a man with no hint of an objection from Paul.

Further, in Paul's letter to the church in Philippi he urges an unnamed fellow-worker (probably Epaphroditus) to "help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel," {Phil 4:3 NIV}.

In the letter to the Romans he mentions other women who labored with him "in the Lord," {Rom 16:1-2, et al.}.

Perhaps no question would ever have arisen about the propriety of women's ministry were it not for two passages from Paul's hand which seem to lay severe restriction upon them. In First Corinthians 14 he says,

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. {1 Cor 14:33b-35 NIV}

Again, in First Timothy 2 he says,

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. {1 Tim 2:11-12 NIV}

Taken by themselves, apart from their contexts, these two passages do seem to prohibit any kind of teaching ministry for women, especially in any public way, within the church. But let us look at some guidelines of interpretation which will help us in understanding just what the apostle means:

1. Nothing in the above quoted passages can be taken in such a way as to contradict what the apostle himself permitted, or referred to with approval, in the practice of the church. He surely did not teach one thing and practice another. If, in First Corinthians 11, he speaks with approval of a woman praying or prophesying in public, as he does, then, surely, in First Corinthians 14 he does not contradict himself by forbidding women even to open their mouths in any circumstance in the public meeting of the church. We must, therefore, read the prohibition of Chapter 14 as applying to something other than the ministry of women permitted in Chapter 11.
2. We must note that the immediate context of both passages quoted above has to do with the problem of disorder, and even some degree of defiance, in the actions of the women involved. In both passages, though widely separated as to recipients and locality, the word *submission* appears:
 1. In Corinth the problem was one of so conducting the meeting that edification of all present would be central; therefore tongues were to be controlled and limited, and so was the exercise of prophesying. Furthermore, they were to remember that "God is not a God of disorder but of peace," and then follows the warning against women speaking in the church. It is clear from this that the apostle was not concerned about women who properly exercised their gifts in prophesying or in praying, but was greatly concerned about women who disrupted the meetings with questions and comments, and perhaps even challenged the teaching of apostolic doctrine with contrary views. This is what he prohibited, as Verse 37 makes crystal clear:

If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. {1 Cor 14:37 NIV}

He then closes the whole section with the admonition, "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way," {1 Cor 14:40 NIV}.

3. The word to Timothy (who was probably living at Ephesus) is similar in character. The general context in which these words about women appear is concerned with regulating the behavior of Christians at meetings, as 3:14 makes clear:

Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. {1 Tim 3:14-15 NIV}

In line with this purpose, Paul tells the men how to pray (without anger or disputing), and the women how to adorn themselves (not with fine clothing but with good works), and from this he moves to the words of prohibition against a woman teaching or having authority over a man. These words cannot be taken as an absolute (no woman should ever teach a man) for if that were true Paul should have rebuked Priscilla for having a part in instructing Apollos. The words "have authority over" provide us the key to understanding this passage. Women should not be permitted the role of authoritative definers of doctrine within the church. They must not be permitted to do this, even though they may mean well, for the role of authoritative interpreters is given by the Holy Spirit to the apostles and elders, who, in the New Testament, were invariably men. This is supported by Paul's references to Adam and Eve which follows.

From this we are warranted in drawing certain conclusions to guide our conduct today:

1. Women certainly can teach. They are given the gift of teaching as freely as it is given to men, and they

must exercise those gifts.

2. Women can teach within the context of church meetings. They are certainly free to teach children and other women without question, but are free to teach men as well if what they are teaching is not a challenge to the understanding of doctrine held by the elders of the church. Many godly and instructed women know far more about the Scriptures than many men, and it would be both absurd and unscriptural to forbid such men to learn from such women.
3. Even the elders should recognize the often unique and godly insights of gifted women teachers and should seek their input in arriving at an understanding of the Scriptures. It is, however, the duty of elders to make the final decision of what is to be taught. No woman may participate in this.

It is my hope that this brief survey will help many in understanding the difficulties involved in answering the question with which we began.

I, personally, thank God for the gifted woman teachers among us at PBC and rejoice that we have little or no problem with the question of proper authority in this matter.

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