



“Innovations and the Divine Pattern”

Part VII: Women Preachers

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With the rise of the women’s liberation movement, women preachers are becoming more accepted in today’s world. As society continues to change, the subject becomes that much more controversial. A few generations ago, female preachers were rare, and it was almost shocking to hear of one. Today, they are increasingly common. Some denominations are rapidly ordaining women to the ministry. Some of these women have risen to international fame and prominence as televangelists and religious authors. A woman’s role in society at large has changed until now, there is little distinction made between men and women in either the home or the public square.

There are some good things that have resulted from this new awareness. First, women are equal to men in the eyes of God and they should be considered so in our eyes as well. Paul wrote, concerning our justification by faith in Christ:

Galatians 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Simply meaning that men and women enjoy the same access to and relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. God values the woman as His creation just as much as He does the man. Furthermore, women are not inferior to men in any respect—not intellectually, spiritually, or otherwise. And all women are, of course, to be treated with human respect and dignity. If a woman does a job, she has every right to be paid as much as a man for that same job. No man has the right to mistreat, disrespect, or look down upon a woman. But does this mean that God did not assign different roles to men and women in the home, and, as we shall study today, in the church? Does this mean that there is no chain of headship and authority that is yet to be respected in the kingdom of God?

In **I Corinthians 14**, as we studied last week, we noted that Paul is regulating the assemblies of the church. When the church was called together, there were rules given as to how the assembly was to be conducted. The Corinthians were guilty of allowing their assemblies to devolve into a disorderly and unbiblical affair and Paul was correcting these abuses and it should be noted that he is doing so by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

I Corinthians 14:34-35 “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. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

It would be difficult to find a more controversial passage in the New Testament, but it would also be difficult to find a more plainly worded commandment in the New Testament. Should this passage be respected and honored by the church today? Does God approve of the innovation of women becoming preachers in the church?

The trend of women preachers has caused a great deal of upheaval in the religious world in recent years. Many denominations have struggled with this controversy and have seen some of their churches divide over the question. Even churches of Christ have been affected over the past couple of generations. A people once known for our conservative view of the scriptures, we have seen division over women in the pulpit and in leadership positions in the local church. When the innovation of Sunday School arose and was contested in churches of Christ many years ago, some warned that bible classes with their women teachers would soon open the door for women in the pulpit. It took some time, but that prediction has started coming to pass. Many of our brethren are now in a very precarious position today, trying to defend the expanded role of women in the public teaching of the church, while at the same time trying to keep women out of the pulpit. As society, and more specifically the religious world, becomes more liberal and accepting regarding these issues, they’re going to find it more and more difficult to stem the swelling tide of change in this regard.

Our appeal today is not based on what the majority of society thinks or what the supreme court might rule. It is not even based on what prominent preachers or theologians of our time might believe. Our appeal is the Bible: what saith the scriptures? Whatever culture changes and how the dictates of society may evolve over time, God’s laws and principles do not change in the process.

I Peter 1:24-25 “For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.”

Emotional arguments also make this a more explosive issue in today’s world. Many assume that men in the church hold the position that women may not preach because there is chauvinism and misogyny. While there very well may be men whose views are clouded by chauvinistic attitudes, the fact is that there are men and women on both sides of the issue with honest convictions, and therefore perceived bias against women is not the underlying cause of this divide. This issue must be decided by what the Bible teaches and not by societal dictates or by ad homonym attacks. The Bible does clearly address the subject. There are two primary passages that deal directly with women and teaching. They are found in **I Corinthians 14** and **I Timothy 2**.

I Corinthians 14:34 “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. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

I Timothy 2:11-14 “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”

In these passages, Paul gives two separate but related prohibitions. First, he tells the Corinthians that women are to keep silent in the church. Obviously, due to the context of the entire chapter, Paul is using the word *church* or *assembly* to refer to the time when the church gathers together for worship and edification. Any public assembly called by the church for these purposes would fall under Paul’s rules given in this chapter. When he said that she is to *keep silent*, he is referring to a woman addressing the assembly. She may sing, for example, because all Christians are commanded by Paul to sing, but she may not address the assembly. She may not teach the assembly. Not only does that mean that she is not to teach or preach in the assembly, but she is also to hold any questions that she may have until a later time when she may ask those questions outside of the assembly. Paul says that she should ask her husband at home.

Then, in **I Timothy 2**, Paul says that first of all, the woman is to *learn*--that, of course, being the opposite of teaching—*in silence*, because Paul did not allow a woman to *teach or to usurp authority over the man*, meaning to *exercise dominion over man*. The word that Paul uses that is translated *teach* is the word *didasko*, which refers to a *discourse*, such as a preacher gives before a congregation, or as a teacher would deliver to a group of people. The woman is plainly forbidden by Paul from doing such. Then he adds *nor to usurp authority over the man*. Many try to interpret Paul’s statement as not allowing a woman to teach a man or to teach over a man. But that is not the case. The two prohibitions against her teaching and usurping authority over the man are separated by the disjunctive conjunction “*nor*.” She is not permitted by the apostle to teach (again, that is to deliver public discourse) *nor* is she allowed to exercise authority over men in the church. The prohibitions may be related, but they are not the same. Then, Paul gives the reasons why by first appealing to the order of creation, stating that Adam was first created, then Eve (**verse 13**), and that the prohibition was a consequence of Eve being the first to fall prey to deception in the garden of Eden (**verse 14**). Friends, note that Paul’s reasons had nothing to do with cultural concerns at Ephesus or at Corinth. Rather, to a precedent that God had decreed from the beginning of time itself.

We can see that these restrictions apply to teaching in a public sphere because in other passages we read that women can and should be teachers of others. We are not contending that women are not allowed to teach under any and all circumstances. The Bible not only allows but instructs her to be a teacher of good things. But where she is instructed to teach is to be done in private, in an individual setting, apart from the public setting. That is the distinction that the Bible makes. Remember from last week’s study that Paul said there are two categories of teaching: that that is done *publicly* and that that is done *privately or from house to house*.

Acts 20:20 “And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you **publicly** (that is, *in common or in view of all*), and from house to house (as opposed to *publicly*),”

We've already read two passages where Paul says that a woman is not allowed to teach in a public setting, but does the Bible give examples of where she may teach in a private situation? Indeed, it does.

Acts 18:24-26 “And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.”

Note that this husband and wife took Apollos aside, *unto them*, into their own home and corrected his misguided teaching. The woman had a part in that. So, notice that not only was a woman permitted to teach in her own home or *in private*, but that she had a part in teaching a man. Therefore, it would be wrong to say that a woman can never teach a man or that Paul was simply forbidding that in **I Timothy 2**. Here, a woman did have a part in teaching a man. You see, the point is where a woman is allowed to teach. In private, she may teach anyone. There is no restriction on who she may teach. If she can teach in private, she can teach a man, woman, or child. But where she is forbidden from teaching, in public, she may teach no one. She can teach anyone in private, but she may teach no one in public. Therefore, she may teach in the home. She may not teach in the public square, according to scripture, including when the church comes together. She is to *learn in silence* at that time, Paul instructed.

Some of my brethren say that she may teach in a public gathering, like maybe a class or conference or seminar, but not in the “worship assembly.” But why would that be? Why would God permit her to teach in any other public gathering but not on Sunday morning at 11:00am? You see, it's much more logical and consistent that Paul is saying that the woman's sphere of teaching is in the private and individual domain and not in public. That would fit the spirit of Paul's command and the background behind it. Older women are to teach younger women (**Titus 2:3-5**), but she can do that in private. That doesn't necessitate public teaching. She may teach an erring man, as we've noticed in the case of Apollos, but she can do so in private just as Priscilla and Aquila did. That doesn't necessitate public teaching. A woman may teach an unbeliever the gospel, whether it be an unbelieving husband, a neighbor, or a friend. There is nothing wrong with that, but her teaching is done in a private setting and not in public. Also, isn't it significant that the qualifications given for elders (that is, pastors or shepherds within the church of the New Testament) all refer to a man, who is for example the husband of one wife (**Titus 1:6, I Timothy 3:2**). Nowhere do the qualifications for such leaders--whether elders, deacons, or evangelists--indicate that women may scripturally serve in those offices.

Now then, I know that that is very unpopular with the thinking of our day, and some dismiss these passages offhand as the opinion of an unmarried, chauvinistic man who possessed authority in the church. Yet, Paul possessed and was inspired by the Spirit of God as he wrote. In fact, only two verses down, he wrote this:

I Corinthians 14:37 “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”

That is, if a man really thinks that he has divine knowledge, then he will admit that the apostle Paul was an apostle of Christ and was writing by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Paul was not issuing an opinion; rather, he was speaking by revelation of Christ and inspiration of the Spirit of God, which gives his words on the matter divine weight.

Others say that Paul was merely addressing a problem strictly at Corinth and that he was straightening out disorder in their assemblies and therefore his words have no relevance to the church in other places or times. Some will say that his writing to Timothy was when Timothy was living in Ephesus where they had the problems of the pagan practices of the temple of Diana which were spilling over into the church and women were imitating those pagan practices in the assembly of the church. And based on these assumptions, people will try to dismiss the prohibition in **I Timothy 2** just as they try to dismiss **I Corinthians 14**. But nowhere in Paul's epistle to Timothy does he cite such a connection. Not only that, but he said this to the Corinthians and some who were skeptical of Paul and his apostolic authority:

I Corinthians 4:17 "For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church."

You see, Paul's instructions for worship and for everyday Christian living applied in every church in every place. In fact, when he addressed the abuses in the assembly in Corinth, he made a rather sarcastic statement.

I Corinthians 14:36 "What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?"

What is Paul asking in that question? He is saying, *who gave you the authority to do differently than other churches? Why do you have the right to be different from the practices of the other churches who abide by apostolic authority?* That is a good question for many churches to ask of themselves in this day and time as well. Paul answers that sarcastic question in the very next verse.

I Corinthians 14:37 "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord."

What Paul taught in Corinth, he taught at other churches as well. So, his teaching on this and other doctrinal matters was universal in its scope and its authority.

But perhaps Paul was merely regulating the use of miraculous gifts in the assembly, and since the church does not possess those gifts today, then maybe his teaching in **I Corinthians 14** doesn't apply at all. Is that the case? Let's think about that. If that were the case, leaving spiritual gifts aside, could two uninspired men stand up and preach at the same time and cause confusion in the assembly? If not, what passage besides **I Corinthians 14:31** would you cite to forbid it? Or could a person speak non-miraculously in a foreign language that no one could understand and do so without an interpreter, leaving the assembly to guess what he was saying in a state of confusion? If that's not right, what passage besides **I Corinthians 14:28** would forbid it? No, Paul's instructions apply with or without the presence of spiritual gifts. What he writes are rules of order and decorum in ANY assembly of the church, then and now.

Then, some allege that Paul only gave these injunctions because women at that time were not educated as they are today and therefore, they were disqualified from teaching at that time. But Paul's instruction has nothing to do with education, for that would've disqualified many of Christ's own apostles from teaching.

Finally, some point to the fact that there are women named in the Bible who served the Lord in tremendous ways that contradict a universal application of **I Timothy 2** and **I Corinthians 14**. For

example, women like Deborah served as judges over Israel, and women such as Miriam and Huldah in the Old Testament are often cited as parallels to the woman preacher. But, ultimately, those women don't pertain to the issue at hand, as they lived under the Old Testament law and they were part of *physical Israel*, whereas Paul is addressing the leadership of *spiritual Israel*, the New Testament church. In the New Testament, we're told of women such as Phebe, who is described as *a servant of the Lord* (**Romans 16:1**). Who knows what the church would've been in Philippi if not for the faith and devotion of Lydia (**Acts 16:14-15**)? Euodia and Syntyche were apparently women of influence in the Philippian church as well, according to **Philippians 4:2-3**. But none of those women were ever identified as preachers, evangelists, elders, or shepherds over the flock.

This is a very important point: the work and influence of women in the church is just as important as that of a man. But the scope and sphere of the woman's work is distinct from that of the man. Remember, she may teach but that doesn't mean that the Bible allows her to preach or to exercise her ability in public. According to **Acts 21:9**, Philip had four daughters who prophesied; that is, they spoke the things given by divine revelation. That doesn't mean they did so publicly. They could just as well have exercised this privilege in private, and in so doing, obeyed the will of God.

Paul said in **I Corinthians 11:5** that a woman may pray or prophesy just as the man may do so, but she is to do so with her long hair as a covering and a sign of subjection, according to **verses 5 and 15**. Again, she can do both of those things in private. She can pray in private and she can prophesy or teach in private. But, you see, what Paul allowed her to do would also not put her at odds with what he forbade, which would be teaching in public.

Finally, friends, this is not a matter of equality or worth. In fact, in **I Corinthians 11**, Paul shows in great detail that the woman enjoys the same relationship to God through Christ that the man does. But she must at the same time be in subjection unto man. After all, Christ is subject unto God (**I Corinthians 11:3**). Does that make Jesus inferior to God the Father? No, the very mystery of the trinity is that the three are one, that God the Son is eternally coexistent and coequal with God the Father. The woman is of great and equal value in the sight of God, but her role in the church is distinct from that of the man. That is true today just as it was true yesterday. And it will be true tomorrow. Though our modern world has sought in this and a thousand different ways to erase those lines of distinction and demarcation, let us follow the teaching of Christ given through His apostles, for it is His church and not ours. May we ever seek His approval and not that of the world.

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