



“LET MEN KEEP SILENCE IN THE CHURCH”

By Ralph Woodrow

I wonder if anyone else has ever used this as a text. Admittedly, I have done so to get your attention. I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that Paul said for WOMEN to keep silence in church. Actually he made both statements.

Let me explain. Paul said if a man gave a message in another tongue, it should be interpreted so everyone could understand. “But if there be no interpreter, *let him keep silence in the church*” (1 Cor. 14:27,28).

No one takes “let him keep silence in the church” to mean a *man* cannot preach, sing, pray, testify, or make announcements. Though Paul used the word “silence” in this verse, we all understand it within the context in which he wrote.

But, just a *few* verses later, when Paul used the very *same* phrase about *women*—“let your women keep silence in the churches”—some tend to ignore the context. Here are his words:

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 says the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for a women to speak in the church (1 Cor. 14:34,35).

Does this passage command the *absolute* silence of women in church? If so, this would not only rule out preaching and teaching by women. It would also make it wrong for a woman to pray, testify, make announcements, read a biblical chapter out loud, or sing. That this was not what Paul meant is clear as we compare scripture with scripture:

Paul’s wording, for example, did not mean women could not *sing*. In another place, he wrote: “...*speaking* to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19). It is understood that both men and *women* sang psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in church. By such singing they could “*teach* and admonish one another” (Col. 3:16). No one limits these verses, so far as I know, to men only.

If Paul’s words about “silence” meant women could have no vocal part in a service, he would have flatly contradicted what he had just written a few verses before! He spoke about “the *whole* church being come together”—a term that would include *women* as well as men. Then he went on to say that “*every one*” could take part—with a psalm, a doctrine, a tongue, a revelation, or interpretation—as long as the overall church body was edified (1 Cor. 14:23-26).

While it is true that Paul used words like “him” or “brethren” (as a manner of speaking), this did not exclude women. For example, he wrote: “If any man is hungry, let him eat at home” (1 Cor. 11:34). If this statement did not include women, might we conclude that a hungry *man* should eat at home, but a hungry *woman* should eat at church—or that *women* don’t get hungry?

When Paul wrote that God grants spiritual gifts to “every *man*” as he wills (1 Cor. 12:11), this cannot mean that only *men* received spiritual gifts. We are *plainly* told that spiritual gifts, such as prophesying, were granted to *women* also (Acts 2:17,18).

“You may *all* prophesy,” Paul wrote, “one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted” (1 Cor. 14:31). That this included women, there can be no doubt, for just a short time before he wrote about “*women* praying and prophesying” at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:5).

In the Old Testament era, prophets were usually men—but not always. We read about “Deborah, a prophetess...she judged Israel” (Judges 4:4); “Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shalum” (2 Kings 22:14); and “Anna, a prophetess” (Lk. 2:36). Mary, the mother of Jesus, prophesied, as did Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (Lk. 1:42-55).

The prophet Joel spoke of a time when spiritual manifestations such as these would occur on a much grander scale. The Spirit would be poured out on “all flesh”—on the old and the young, on men and women—so that “your sons *and* your daughters shall prophesy.” This found fulfillment on the day of Pentecost (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17). Years later, the book of Acts mentions Phillip’s four daughters “which did prophesy” (Acts 21:9).

It has sometimes been debated whether “prophesying” means *foretelling* (prediction) or *forth-telling* (teaching). It could be either. But, as Paul used the term in Corinthians, prophesying served three purposes: it was for edification, exhortation, and comfort (1 Cor. 14:3). Commenting on this point, esteemed biblical commentator, Adam Clarke (1760—1832), wrote:

No preacher can do *more*, every person must acknowledge; because to *edify*, *exhort*, and *comfort*, are the prime ends of the Gospel ministry. If *women* thus prophesied, then *women preached*....Christian *women*, as well as *men*, labored in the ministry of the word. In those times of simplicity all persons, whether men or women, who had received the knowledge of the truth, believed it to be their duty to propagate it to the uttermost of their power. Many have spent much useless labor in endeavoring to prove that women did not *preach*. (*Clarke’s Commentary*, notes on Romans 16:12).

With all of the biblical references about women speaking in various ways—some right in Corinthians—it seems clear that Paul’s words about women being silent in church cannot mean *absolute* silence. In what sense, then, did he use this term? Again, Adam Clarke’s words are weighty:

It is evident from the context, that the apostle refers here to *asking questions*....It was permitted to any *man* to *ask questions*, to *object*, *altercate*, *attempt to refute*, etc., in the synagogue, but this liberty was not allowed to any woman. St. Paul confirms this in reference also to the Christian Church; he orders them to *keep silence*; and, if they wished to *learn any thing*, *let them inquire of their husbands at home*; because it was perfectly indecorous for *women* to be contending with *men* in public assemblies, on points of doctrine, cases of conscience, etc. But this by no means intimated that when a woman received any particular *influence from God* to enable her to teach, that she was not to obey that influence; on the contrary, she was to

obey it. . . . *All* that the apostle opposes here is their *questioning, finding fault, disputing*, etc. in the Christian Church. (*Clarke's Commentary* notes on 1 Corinthians 14:34,35).

I have sometimes heard the view that in early Christian assemblies, the men were on the main floor and the women in a balcony. Because of this, women had to holler questions down to their husbands, thus disrupting the service. But when we consider that the early Christians commonly met in houses (1 Cor. 16:19, etc.), the balcony part is highly unlikely.

However, the basic point is valid: the practice of women asking questions—whether of their husbands or the speaker—was causing confusion in the services. And confusion, lack of order, was the issue Paul dealt with throughout this chapter.

First Corinthians was written by Paul in response to a letter he had received from the church leaders at Corinth (1 Cor. 7:1). They evidently asked his advice about some women who were interrupting services by speaking out and asking questions. When Paul wrote back, it was not necessary for him to repeat or spell out what they had written. *They* knew what they had asked, so he just gave his answer: “Let your women keep silence in the church. . . . let them ask their husbands at home.” They would have understood his answer within the context of their question.

Suppose a church today had a problem with some rowdy young people who were constantly talking to each other and laughing in church. By this behavior, the services could do them little good and their lack of reverence would be a hindrance to others. Suppose a letter was written to a church leader, asking for advice. He might write back: “Your young people must be silent in the church. Let them do their talking after the service is over.” No one would take this to mean that young people could not speak in other ways in church. We believe the same principle applies in the passage about women.

When Paul said women were to hold their questions and ask their husbands at home, are we to assume he believed men were smarter than women? We think not. There were *educational* differences that must be factored in.

Education in those days was primarily for men—seldom for women. Because of this, it would have been more difficult for women to understand some things that were

being preached. Their questioning was disruptive, so Paul—in this situation—applied the practice used in the synagogue. Women were to be silent in church, and ask the questions to their husbands when they got home. The whole matter is best understood because of the *educational* differences that existed between men and women.

But differences in education did not make women inferior or unreliable. While some Jewish rabbis taught that the evidence of a hundred women was not equal to that of one man, Jesus did not believe this way. He even committed a very important message—the reality of his resurrection from the dead!—to *women*. They ran and told the male disciples the good news (Matt. 28:7-10; John 20:17).

Nor did Paul—contrary to what some assume—believe women were unreliable. He even entrusted a woman to carry his letter—what we know today as the book of Romans—all the way to Rome! The explanatory note at the end of Romans (included in some editions of the Bible) says:

Written to the Romans from Corinthus, and sent by Phebe servant of the church at Cenchrea.

For Phebe to travel to Rome from Cenchrea (located about six miles from Corinth), would have been a long and treacherous journey, especially in that time. We don't know the details that surrounded her trip, or the perils she faced. But upon her arrival at Rome, the believers gathered, thrilled to obtain a letter from Paul. In it he had written:

I commend to you our sister Phebe, which is a servant [minister] of the church which is at Cenchrea. . . . receive her in the Lord. . . . she has been a great help to many people, including me (Rom. 16:1,2).

Realizing she has worked closely with Paul, they are anxious to know how he is doing. Surely she can share many precious things. But, the way some believe, she would not have been permitted to speak to them. She had to be silent in the church!

Can a woman be a counselor? How about a doctor or pharmacist, giving medical advice? Can she teach in a college? Can she direct help from a 911 call? Can she be a dispatcher for a fire department? Can she make safety announcements on an airplane? Can she be a newscaster? Can a young woman give a speech at her high school graduation ceremony? How is it that some can accept

the fact that women serve in all kinds of responsible positions—including jobs that require speaking—but that GOD does not want them to speak in church!

I know several Christian women who have written wonderful, inspirational poems. Would it be wrong for one of them to read a poem in church? Or would a *man* need to read her poem to make it acceptable?

Suppose a woman comes to Christ and has a great testimony of how her life was dramatically changed. If her story is printed in a tract, booklet, or magazine article, would it be wrong to read it? Of course not. How, then, would it be wrong for her to give this testimony in a church service?

Suppose a woman writes the words to a gospel song and makes a recording. Would it be wrong to listen to it? Of course not. Why, then, would it be wrong for her to sing it in church?

Is there not an inconsistency here—to believe a woman can “speak” through the pages of a book, magazine article, or the words of a song she has written, but it is wrong for her to speak in church?

If Paul had a negative attitude about women, as is sometimes assumed, how could we explain the favorable statements he made about women who were in Christian ministry?

In Romans 16:12, he made special mention of three different women: “Tryphena and Tryphosa, who labor in the Lord,” and “the beloved Persis, which labored *much* in the Lord.”

He mentioned Euodias and Syntyche, as women that “labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow laborers” (Phil. 4:2,3). The *New Living Translation* words it this way: “. . . these women. . . worked hard with me in telling others the Good News. And they worked with Clement and the rest of my co-workers.”

Paul referred to Aquila and Priscilla, husband and wife, as his dedicated helpers (Rom. 16:3). They—Aquila and *Priscilla*—were effectively used of the Lord to “expound the way of God” to Apollos (Acts 18:26).

Paul wrote that Andronicus and Junia, husband and wife, were “of note among the apostles” (Rom. 16:7). Some take this to mean that even the apostles considered them of *note* or (as some translations) *outstanding*. Others believe they—husband and wife—were apostles themselves, and outstanding

ones at that! Either way, this would place Junia's ministry in a positive light.

We should keep in mind that "apostles" in the New Testament were not limited to the Twelve. Apollos, James, Barnabas, Epaphroditus, Silvanus, and Timothy were also called apostles; that is, ones sent forth on a mission; or (as we would say today), "missionaries."

Paul referred to Phebe, the woman who carried his letter to Rome, as "a *servant* of the church at Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1,2). Though translators have used the word "servant" here, the same word is often translated "minister" (*Strong's Concordance*, 1249). It was the word Paul used when he said: "I was made a *minister*...that I should preach...the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:7,8). He used the same word when referring to different preachers as ministers: Tychicus, a "faithful *minister* in the Lord" (Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7), Epaphras, "a faithful *minister* of Christ" (Col. 1:7), and Timothy, "a good *minister* of Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 4:6).

It was in reference to Phebe (and other women mentioned in Romans 16) that Adam Clarke wrote: "Christian *women*, as well as men, labored in the ministry of the word."

Question: What New Testament book is a letter written to a lady?

Answer: Second John. It is addressed to "the elect Lady and her children, whom I love in the truth."

The Greek word translated "Lady," *Kuria*, is the feminine form of the word translated Lord, master, etc. (*Strong's Concordance*, 2959, 2962). Did John honor her with this title because she was prominent in some secular sense? Or, might it be more likely he did so because of her *spiritual* position—because she was prominent in Christian ministry? It would seem this was the intended meaning, for she was *widely known and loved* by all those who knew the truth (verse 1).

Further, John calls her "elect" or (as in some translations) "chosen." *All* believers in Scripture are called elect or chosen, so why this choice of words? The implication is that she was elected or chosen—not just as a Christian—but to be uniquely used in the work of God.

We know that she had converts, for John spoke of "her *children*." This was the same term he used when speaking of his converts: "My little *children*, these things write I unto you..." (1 John 2:1); "I have no greater joy

than to hear that my *children* walk in truth" (3 John 4), etc. These were spiritual children—not physical descendants. The sister of the elect Lady was also in the ministry and had "children" or converts (verse 13).

Christians at the time commonly met in houses (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; etc.). Apparently this elect Lady was in charge of a house church, for John warned her that if one came teaching certain doctrines, to "receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed" (verse 10). If she was not the pastor of this house church, why did he tell *her* these things—why not the pastor?

Though John said he had "*many things*" to write to her, he held back. The reason? He planned to come and see her in person! "I trust I shall shortly see you, and we shall speak face to face" (verses 13,14). Imagine John the apostle coming to town, by-passing the pastor, calling on a female member of his church, and spending considerable time with her discussing doctrinal issues!

Back in the 1970s I talked with a pastor who claimed his church (which did not believe in instrumental music) was the one true church. I asked how he felt about certain other churches that had the same organizational roots, believed basically the same as his church, but who used a piano in their services. Did this make these other churches false? "Well, that's part of it," he told me, "but there are other things, like one over in Porterville, *they even had a woman speak in the church!*"—as though that were the end of the world!

This is not to make light of anyone. There are Christians who honestly believe women must always be silent in church. Admittedly, we are all influenced, to some degree, by our background and experiences.

On a personal note, the man who was my pastor during my teenage years, came to Christ through the ministry of a woman preacher. He has passed on now, but several of us are in the Lord's work today because of him. Nevertheless, there are some who would insist that the woman preacher who led him to Christ was of *Satan!* They would tell us she should have kept silent in the church. Others, a bit more charitable, might point out that God even spoke through Balaam's donkey.

Out of hundreds of churches in which I have had the opportunity to speak over the years, a *few* held a limited view about women taking part in services. In every one of these, without exception, I seemed

to sense some-thing was lacking. Their strictness failed to add anything positive. Instead, it was often a source of division and confusion.

In one of these churches, I knew a lady who prayerfully studied her Bible daily, looking up words in a concordance, comparing scripture with scripture, whose heart became filled with many wonderful truths. But the "silence" teaching ruled out any chance of her sharing these things in church.

If this extreme view were carried out worldwide, it would silence a considerable portion of the body of Christ!

Some years ago, a man who attended a church where I was holding meetings, invited me to his house for lunch. Briefly stated, the conversation went something like this: "Brother Woodrow, you are a great student of the Bible. I've got a couple Bible questions I've been wanting to ask you. The Bible says Jesus called twelve apostles. What I want to know is this: How many of them were *women?*"

His next question was similar: "Later, Jesus called the Seventy. How many of these were *women?*"

He was *totally* opposed to women having any public ministry. He did try to temper his words by telling me he was not against women—why his own mother was a woman!

It is one thing to believe God has placed the responsibility of church leadership on men; it is another thing to suppose women have no valid ministry within the church.

In addition to First Corinthians 14:34,35, only *two* other verses are quoted about women being silent (1 Tim. 2:11,12):

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

First, it should be noticed that the word "church" does not appear here. But if this is the subject, I would think these verses should be understood in somewhat the same way as the Corinthian passage. Silence would need to be understood within the context of a woman not teaching or usurping authority over a man.

Several years ago I was discussing this passage with a pastor in San Francisco. He made this point: "If I invite a woman to sing or speak in my church, and she does so, she is not usurping authority over me—I asked her to do this!"

It would appear that Paul's words, "I do not allow a woman to teach," should be understood in some specific, limited sense. In another passage he said older women should be "*teachers* of good things; that they may *teach* the young women..." (Titus 2:3,4). Unless one believes women were excluded from the New Testament writings, verses like Hebrews 5:12 were addressed to women also: "...you ought to be *teachers*." If Paul meant a woman could not teach in any sense of the word, a woman could not even be a school teacher!

Something else: The Greek word translated "silence" in these verses (*Strong's Concordance*, 2270—2272), is a different word than in the Corinthian passage. The word used here does not mean *absolute* silence, as though one could not speak at all, but a relative silence. It has been translated "held their peace," "ceased," "quietness" and "peaceable" in the following examples:

When some confronted Peter because he had preached to Gentiles, he explained what happened. "When they heard these things they *held their peace* [were silent] and glorified God, *saying...*" (Acts 11:18). Notice their "silence" did not mean they said nothing.

Another example involved Paul. "And when he would not be persuaded, we *ceased* [were silent], *saying...*" (Acts 21:14). Again, being "silent" did not mean not speaking at all.

Instead of being busybodies or gossipers, Paul wrote that Christians should do their work "with *quietness* [silence]" (2 Thess.

3:12). This did not mean they could never say anything!

Paul wrote that prayer should be offered for kings, "that we may lead a quiet and *peaceable* [silent] life" (1 Tim. 2:2). This did not mean a speechless life!

A person who is "silent" (according to the meaning of *this* Greek word) does not argue, has calmness of speech, is willing to listen. It does not mean silence in the *absolute* sense.

There is something else about First Timothy 2:11,12 that should be noticed. In the three previous verses, Paul uses the term "men" and "women" in a general way, not necessarily meaning married or unmarried men or women. But when he comes to *these* verses, he speaks of "the woman" and "the man," seemingly indicating a change in word usage. Some believe he may now be speaking specifically of a married man and married woman—husband and wife.

The verses that follow tend to confirm this. Adam and Eve, who were husband and wife, are mentioned. "Childbearing" is also mentioned, referring to a married woman. Could the focus of First Timothy 2:11,12 be issues of authority that involved husband and wife? This would seem logical, for it is not a question of a woman usurping authority over a man down the street, nor is it a question of a woman being in subjection to her son, even though he is a man. A wife is to be in subjection to her *own* husband (Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:22, etc.).

As I understand the scriptures, God has placed a responsibility upon the husband

to care for his wife and family. As the wife looks to him for leadership, she is not to disrespect or belittle him. She is not to "teach" him in the sense of usurping authority over him; that is, she is not to be argumentative or domineering. If he follows Christ as his leader, she can look to him as her leader with confidence. But if he does not follow Christ, his role as leader is seriously flawed.

Out of 7,957 verses in the New Testament, only *four* (1 Cor. 14:34,35; 1 Tim. 2:11,12) are used to support the idea that women must be silent in the church. It seems to me that some have based elaborate conclusions on this tiny portion of Scripture.

When we consider all the hurtful and negative ideas about women that were in vogue in the ancient world, the words of Paul are glorious—like a bright light shining in a dark place!

You [men *and* women] are *all* the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ....There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, *there is neither male nor female*: for you are all *one* in Christ. (Galatians 3:26-28).

This paper is presented "as a study." You may not agree with everything. That's alright. It would be foolish for any one of us to claim to have the full and final answer on "everything." We are learning, growing, sorting things out. We do hope this information can temper some of the harsh, negative, and fruitless ideas that exist regarding women in Christian ministry.