

# *The Role of Women in the Teachings of Paul*

## GLENWOOD CHURCH OF CHRIST

James W. Thompson—January 29, 2017

1. Because all of the discussion of the role of women in the church is based on the teachings of Paul, we face unique challenges in interpretation.
  - a. While some issues of biblical interpretation may be matters of curiosity, we come to this issue with much at stake—with emotional investment, prior understandings, and the potential for division.
  - b. We attempt to apply to our own situation the words that were spoken to an ancient house church that did not have youth groups, Sunday schools, and other kinds of meetings that we know.
  - c. As with all passages in the Bible, the original readers would have understood passages that are obscure to us.
  
2. Two primary challenges confront us as we study these and all other Scriptures.
  - a. Exegesis: What did the passage mean to those who heard it? I.e., What was the covering that Paul instructs women to wear in I Corinthians 11:2–16? What did the Greek words mean? What customs is he referring to?
  - b. Hermeneutics: How do we apply passages written to a specific situation in a specific culture to our own time? I.e., should women be silent in the assembly? What assembly? The Sunday school? The small group? Should we prohibit the wearing of jewelry and braided hair (cf. I Timothy 2:9)? Were the New Testament statements answering a specific question for a specific church or meant for all churches? How do we determine what passages apply to our situation? These are judgment calls that churches continue to make.
  
3. Before we look at controversial passages, we notice the prominence of women in the churches in a culture where associations and groups were composed almost entirely of men.
  - a. Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchrea (Romans 16:1–2), travels from her home (near Corinth) to Rome.
  - b. Note other prominent women.
    - i. Priscilla is an active participant in ministry (she and her husband taught Apollos, Acts 18:26).
    - ii. Mary (Romans 16:6), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Romans 16:12) “labored in the Lord” (usually a term for evangelistic activity).
    - iii. Euodia and Syntyche labored with Paul (Philippians 4:2–3).

- c. According to Galatians 3:28, "there is no longer male and female."
4. I Corinthians 11:2–16 and 14:33–36, which appear at the beginning and end of a section on public worship, give instructions restricting women.
- a. In I Corinthians 11:2–16 Paul gives instructions on how to dress for church, which might have been necessitated by the mixture of cultures that came with their different ideas about decent attire.
    - i. It is assumed that both men and women pray and prophesy.
    - ii. The focus is that women should have heads covered, and men should have heads uncovered when they prophesy.
    - iii. Our first challenge is to ask what Paul is actually asking them to do; i.e., what does he mean by "having something down the head" (the literal Greek)? Is it a veil? Probably.
    - iv. The second challenge is to ask how one applies the passage today? Should we dress in a first-century way? What does he mean by long hair for men?
    - v. The principle here is more certain: Paul expects women to dress as women and men to dress as men.
  - b. In I Corinthians 14:33–36 Paul concludes the chapter on tongues and prophecy with the command, "Let the women be silent in the churches."
    - i. This passage comes as a surprise, since the entire chapter has been about prophecy and tongue-speaking.
    - ii. Paul has called on others to be silent earlier in the passage (14:28).
    - iii. Does Paul mean "women" or "wives" (the words are the same in Greek)? That is, does he mean the wives of prophets should be silent and stop interrupting? Or does he mean all women?
  - c. Our major challenge is to determine the consistency of 11:2–16 and 14:33–36.
    - i. Women pray and prophesy in chapter 11, but are asked to be silent in 14:34.
    - ii. In both instances, Paul says that his instructions are valid in all of the churches (11:16; 14:33).
5. A second passage on the restrictions of women is I Timothy 2.
- a. The larger context indicates that the primary issue is to confront false teaching (1:3–11, 18–20; cf. 4:1–6). All of I Timothy should be read with that in mind. Timothy is charged with preserving the church against heresy.
  - b. I Timothy 2 addresses the context for preserving the church from false teachers.
    - i. I Timothy 2:1–2 is a thesis statement for the chapter.
    - ii. "Prayers for all in power"
    - iii. "That we may live a quiet and peaceful life"; i.e., the public is watching. We show that we are not chaotic.
      - a) I Timothy 2:3–7, "God wants all men to be saved."
      - b) Instructions for men: "lifting holy hands in prayer without quarreling or wrangling."
    - iv. One verse is given for men, six verses for women

- a) Has this already become an issue?
- b) Note the references to women in 5:14–16 (some have gone after Satan).
- c) Issue of attire in verses 9–10.
- v. Instructions suggest that these are wealthy women.
  - a) Prohibition of expensive clothing corresponds to ancient criticisms of the attire of the loose woman.
  - b) “Like a woman professing godliness.” This is prohibition of behavior that offends the public (cf. I Peter 3:1–7).
  - c) Second instructions for women: teaching
- vi. Verse 11, “learn in quietness” picks up the phrase in verse 2, “that we may live a quiet and peaceful life.”
  - a) “To teach or have/usurp authority.” Does the second verb define the first? Apparently so. Teaching was authoritative teaching.
  - b) The prohibition is against teaching. He does not mention all types of speech (i.e., prophecy).

### Small Group Discussion

1. How does reading the entire context influence or change your reading of these controversial passages?
2. Assuming that Paul was consistent in I Corinthians 11 and 14, how do you explain the apparent differences between the two, when one assumes that women pray and prophesy and the other demands silence?
3. How do you determine which passages apply today? All of chapter 14? Or only 14:33–36? All or none of chapter 11? How do you determine what parts of I Timothy 2 apply today? The entire chapter? Or selected verses?