

Should Women Teach?

*A commentary on Paul's teaching in
I Corinthians 14:33—35 &
I Timothy 2:12
by
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“And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.”

I Timothy 2:12 NKJV

If we interpret this verse, isolated from all the rest of the Scriptures, without consulting other passages from the Bible, we would have to conclude that the doctrine of the Apostle Paul for this Church age was that no woman should ever teach any man about spiritual matters anytime, privately or publicly. If we do not study this verse closely, we would also have to conclude that all women should never speak of spiritual things when men are present.

However, we know that it is never prudent to interpret any portion of Scripture isolated from the whole body of truth found in the Bible. *“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” II Peter 1:20-21 NKJV* All Scripture comes from the mind of God and is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

We can begin our study of the verse in ***I Timothy*** by looking for the meaning of the Greek words that Paul used to make sure that we understand the intent of the Apostle. The phrase, *“I do not permit”* means that Paul did not give permission or liberty to women to teach or exercise dominion over men. The word *“teach”* means to teach or instruct others by words or

demonstration. Neither the Greek nor the context of the verse indicate that Paul's prohibition refers only to public occasions, but rather speaks of a general prohibition of these things. The phrase "*to have authority over a man*" means to usurp the authority of another for ones' self. The word "*silence*" does not mean never open your mouth to speak, but rather to cease from words and noise that confuse, distract and disturb.

These meanings of the Greek words that Paul used help us to begin to understand what he is teaching us in this verse, but, by themselves, are not sufficient to alter the initial conclusion that we mentioned in the opening paragraph of this lesson.

Let's expand our look at this verse a little by considering it in the context of Paul's two epistles to Timothy. The emphasis of Paul's letters to Timothy was the importance of teaching and guarding sound doctrine. (*I Timothy 1:3 – 11 / 4:1 – 7*) There were many false teachers of false doctrines that were influencing many in Timothy's congregation. One of the results of the corruption of false teaching is the rejection of God's divine order for the family and for the local assembly. (*I Timothy 2:8 – 15 / 4:3 / 5:9 – 15*) There is equality in nature, importance and worth between men and women both in the original creation and in the New Creation. Both were created in God's own image. (*Genesis 1:26, 27*) Our position in Christ is the same for both male and female. (*Galatians 3:28*)

Nevertheless, God has made a difference in the responsibilities and roles of men and women in the family and in society in order that there might be order. The man has the responsibility to love his wife as Christ loved the Church. The man has the responsibility to provide for his family's needs and to be the spiritual leader of the family. God has given the man the authority in the home in order to fulfill his duties as the head of the family. The woman has the responsibility to support her husband and respect his authority as the head of the family. She is to be the administrator of the household and of the children. The godly woman will be a good friend and counselor to her husband and the godly husband will seek out her help and advice before exercising his godly authority. (Man - *Ephesians 5:25 – 29* / *I Peter 3:7* / *Colossians 3:19* Woman - *Ephesians 5:22, 33* / *Titus 2:5*)

False doctrine denies this divine order in the family. The sound doctrine of Paul's epistles that teaches the equality of men and women in Christ does not annul the social order that God has established for the distinct roles and responsibilities of men and women.

In the local assembly the primary leadership of elders and pastors should be male. This is the pattern and teaching of the New Testament. (*I Timothy 3:1 – 7*) However, it is evident that in the early Church women occupied other positions of leadership and importance in submission to the

male leadership of the local assembly. (*Romans 16:1 – 4*)

Apparently, those in Timothy's congregation that were the most receptive to false doctrine were some of the women. (*II Timothy 3:1 – 7*) "Silly or gullible women" is a description of adult women who are foolish and without spiritual maturity. They embraced the false teaching of the false teachers, rejected God's divine order for the family, rebelled against their husbands and promoted false doctrine in the Church. In this context we can understand Paul's prohibition to be to this group of women in the congregation that pretended to be teachers, but whose conduct and teaching were usurpation of authority and the source of confusion in the congregation. The conduct and teaching of these women contradicted Paul's sound doctrine and the apostle demands that they keep silent and cease from their noisy rhetoric that was disturbing the peace and well-being of the local assembly.

There was a similar situation in the congregation at Corinth. (*I Corinthians 14:33 – 35*) Apparently, many sisters in the meeting were among those who were abusing the gifts of the Spirit and were speaking in other tongues in the general congregation when there was no interpretation to the message in tongues. Also, many of the women were interrupting the meetings with foolish and unnecessary questions. Paul's solution to end such confusion in the

general assembly was to have the women stop interrupting the service and to ask their questions of their husband at home.

When Paul says, *“and if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church,”* he is not saying that women in general cannot and should not learn doctrine in Church or that they should never open their mouth in the public assembly. If that was his thought, then he would have simply forbidden women to attend Church. If women come to a Bible study with an open heart to receive from the Lord His Word, they are going to learn something, not from their husband at home, but while sitting in a public meeting. Paul’s teaching simply emphasizes the importance of order in the local assembly and forbids women or anyone to conduct themselves in such a way as to bring disorder and confusion that contradict sound teaching or that creates an atmosphere that is not conducive for learning sound doctrine.

If it is universal Church doctrine that women in this Church age should never teach any man about spiritual things and that no woman should ever open her mouth in a public worship service, then the rest of the New Testament and Paul’s teaching and practice would have to agree with that doctrine. A brief look at the rest of the New Testament and the rest of Paul’s teaching and practice quickly reveal that they do not support

such a conclusion of such a universal doctrine.

We can start with the book of Acts. In *Acts 1:12 – 14* and *2:1 – 4* we read the account of the day of Pentecost when the Church was born. Among the 120 were several women. The account reveals that they were “*all*” praying together and they were “*all*” filled with the Spirit and spoke in tongues. The women as well as the men opened their mouth and spoke in tongues under the direction of the Holy Spirit. (*Acts 2:18*) The Spirit did not make any distinction between male and female in that public gathering. If *I Timothy 2:12* taught that a woman should never open her mouth in public worship services, then the Holy Spirit made a mistake in directing these women to speak in tongues on the day of Pentecost. Obviously, we know that the Holy Spirit doesn’t make mistakes so we have to conclude that in *I Timothy 2:12* and *I Corinthians 14:33 – 35* Paul is referring to a specific problem and a specific group of women in those assemblies.

The instructions in *I Corinthians 14:33 – 35* of not permitting women to speak in the public meetings and of requiring them to ask their husband at home if they wanted to learn something were not followed universally by other assemblies or even by Paul himself. These instructions were necessary to correct the confusion caused by the abuse of the gifts of the Spirit in the congregation at Corinth.

Lydia in *Acts 16:13 – 15* is one example of

a woman who learned sound doctrine in a public meeting and not from asking her husband questions in their own home. Paul did not refuse to assemble himself with these women who desired to learn sound doctrine. He did not insist that their husbands first learn the doctrine and then teach it to their wives in their own home. In these prayer and Bible Study meetings with Paul these women surely asked Paul wise and prudent questions that he answered without rebuke. Paul's actions in *Acts 16* contradict his teaching in *I Timothy 2:12* and *I Corinthians 14:33 – 35*. Paul never compromised universal Church doctrine, so we must understand his instructions in those passages to be dealing with a local problem in those local assemblies. The principals of order and edification are universal Church truths, but the specific prohibitions were directed at a specific group and class of women and not at women in general.

Priscilla is an example of a woman who taught a man about the deep things of God in the will of God contrary to Paul's instruction in *I Timothy 2:12*. (*Acts 18:24 – 26*) The passage doesn't say that Aquila explained the way of God more acutely and Priscilla stood by and watched, but rather that "they," Aquila and Priscilla taught him. In the Greek Priscilla's name is mentioned before her husband's which according to the custom of Greek writing meant that she was the more predominant of the two concerning their

teaching skills. In other words, it was probably Priscilla that had the greater ability to explain the word of God more profoundly to Apollos. There is no evidence at all the Priscilla usurped authority over her husband or over Apollos, but rather in submission to Aquila and with Apollos' willingness to learn from her, she expounded the depth of the truth of God's word more accurately to Apollos.

It's important to remember that Paul's prohibition in *I Timothy 2:12* makes no distinction between women teaching men publicly or privately, but simply states that he does not permit women to teach or usurp authority over a man. Paul never reprimands Priscilla for teaching sound doctrine to a man nor does he chastise Aquila for allowing his wife to teach. To the contrary, Paul always refers to the couple with words of love and appreciation. (*Romans 16.3, 4 / I Corinthians 16:19 / II Timothy 4:19*) This evidence proves that Paul's prohibition in *I Timothy 2:12* is not universal doctrine for the whole Church, but rather the necessary correction for a few foolish women who were disturbing the meetings with false doctrines and foolish questions and who were rebelling against their husband's authority and the male leadership in the Church.

In *Acts 21:9* we also have the example of Philip's daughters who prophesied. One who prophesies proclaims and reveals the will of God to those who hear them. The gifts of the Spirit are

given for the edification of the whole Body of Christ, both male and female. (***I Corinthians 14:3***) The Holy Spirit who inspired the instructions given by Paul to correct some problems in Timothy's congregation and in Corinth is the same Holy Spirit that inspired the daughters of Philip to prophecy. This means that the instructions of ***I Timothy 2:12*** are not universal for all women in all places.

There is still more scriptural evidence that the Holy Spirit permits and enables women to teach men in the way of the Lord and that He gives them liberty to participate in the public worship services, even in a vocal manner. "*But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved.*" ***I Corinthians 11:5*** Though this passage is a reprimand to some disorderly women in the Church at Corinth, nevertheless it is not a prohibition to them not to pray or prophecy in the worship service. In fact, Paul in this passage is advising the women how they should pray and prophecy in the meetings in a way that would please the Lord and not be a stumbling block to the unbelievers.

Jesus chose to reveal Himself first to women after His resurrection and then commanded them to announce His resurrection to the apostles. (***John 20:18 / Matthew 28:10 / Mark 16:10 – 13 / Luke 24:10***) How can we

deny that God can use and has used women to proclaim the good news of the Gospel even to men when Jesus Himself chose women to announce His resurrection to the male disciples? The teaching of Paul does not annul Jesus' nor the Holy Spirit' approval of women being used to receive a revelation of truth and then announcing it to others, including to men.

Paul himself highly valued the contribution of women to the work of the gospel and to the Body of Christ and in his epistles often acknowledged the work and ministry of women. (*Romans 16:1 – 7 / Philippians 4:2, 3*)

In the light of the whole of the New Testament, including Paul's other epistles, we cannot interpret the instruction of *I Timothy 2:12* and *I Corinthians 14:33 – 35* as a universal prohibition of women teaching or speaking in public worship services. Paul in those passages was correcting the conduct of a specific group of women who were conducting themselves in a disorderly manner in the meetings. Their conduct was contrary to sound doctrine and caused confusion and chaos rather than spiritual edification.

The teaching and example of Scripture is that men should take the place of leadership in the family and in the local assembly and that women should submit themselves to their own husbands in the Lord. However, it is also apparent that the Holy Spirit chooses women as well as men to give

them gifts and ministries for the edification of the whole Body of Christ and equips and enables them to exercise those gifts and ministries in the public worship services.

Some, by their strict and narrow interpretation of *I Timothy 2:12*, are afraid to allow women to teach in the public meetings for fear of being disobedient to the will of God. It is good to desire to be obedient to the instruction of God's Word without compromise. However, we must always compare Scripture with Scripture to fully understand what the will of God is that we might worship God in spirit and in truth. In the light of the whole body of Truth found in the New Testament teaching, I think it's important that we be careful never to be guilty of rejecting a blessing from God through the operation of a gift or ministry simply because the instrument that God chooses to manifest that gift or ministry may be a woman.

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