

# Should Women be Silent in Church?

By Melanie Stone

There are two main passages of Scripture written by the Apostle Paul that have caused some to question whether women should teach or lead, especially in church. One passage is I Timothy 2:11-12 and the other is I Corinthians 14:34-35. We'll start by addressing Paul's letter to Timothy.

***I Timothy 2:11-12*** "(11) Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. (12) And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence."

I Timothy 2:11-12 is a passage of Scripture that has caused several well-meaning Christians to question whether women are to teach or lead in a local church. These two verses were part of a letter that the Apostle Paul had written to a younger pastor named Timothy. Paul had started in Ephesus and placed Timothy there as the pastor.

Paul seems to be straightforward in his instruction to Timothy concerning the church at Ephesus. It sounds as if Paul says that men are in authority over women; therefore, women should never be in a position where they are teaching men. However, in Romans 16, Paul takes time to end a letter to the Romans by thanking his partners in ministry, a list that included several women. It seems that Paul is contradicting himself. Did Paul believe that all men had authority over all women? Did he believe that women were spiritually underneath the rank of men?

Paul's ministry led him to travel to several cities. In a study of Paul's journeys, I have listed verses that show us Paul's direct involvement with women in ministry:

**Acts 18:2, 26** Paul got to know Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth. The ministry couple had a teaching ministry there.

**Acts 21:8-9** Paul stayed with Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven early church leaders. He had four daughters who prophesied.

**Romans 16:3** Paul refers to Priscilla as a fellow worker in Christ Jesus.

**Romans 16:1-2** Phoebe was the ruler of the church at Cenchrea. The Greek word used for helper in verse 2 is the feminine form of the Greek word, which means, "maintain, be over, rule." Literally the word means "protectress," someone who has the responsibility to watch over, guard and protect."

**Romans 16:7** Junias is mentioned. In history, John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople said, "Oh, how great is the devotion of this woman that she should be counted worthy of the appellation of apostle."<sup>1</sup>

**Colossians 4:15** Nympha was over a church gathering in her home.

**I Corinthians 1:11** Chloe was over a church gathering in her home.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Who Said Women Can't Teach?" by Charles Trombly

I think it's obvious from looking at Paul's ministry that Paul highly respected women as teachers and leaders in ministry. If Paul accepted women in ministry, then there must be another interpretation of I Timothy 2:11-12.

**History.** The history of Ephesus will help us understand the purpose behind Paul's writing. Ephesus was a city known for a temple built to the goddess Diana. Take a moment and read about Paul's ministry in Acts 19:1-20. When Paul arrived in Ephesus, he found some Christ followers and prayed for the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Paul also went into a Jewish synagogue in Ephesus and taught for months. When there was opposition to his teaching, he took his students outside of the synagogue and taught daily in the school of Tyrannus. He taught there in Ephesus for an additional two years.

During Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Acts 19:11 says that God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, including a transference of anointing through cloth that Paul would have on his body. When the fabric was placed on the sick or tormented, the power of the anointing would heal and deliver. There were some Jews who began to use the name of Jesus to take authority over evil spirits; however, they were not Christ followers themselves. They encountered a spirit that said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" The spirit overtook seven sons of a Jewish priest, named Sceva, beating them, stripping them of their clothes, and caused them to run off. Many in Ephesus heard about the miracles and the power of Paul's ministry. There were also people who practiced magic that turned from their ways and followed Christ. Verse 20 says that the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

Paul had been in Ephesus about two years and three months, teaching a group of people and planting the church at Ephesus. Paul was preparing to go to Rome, so he sent Timothy and Erastus ahead. After the two left, a man named Demetrius began an uprising. Demetrius was a blacksmith who made silver shrines that people would buy to worship the goddess Diana. Christianity was hurting his business, so Demetrius gathered others involved in trade. The group began to shout out, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." They drew a crown into the theater, causing many to question whether this was right or wrong. Paul's companions urged him not to go into the theater to speak to the crowd. They sent a Jew named Alexander instead; however, the crowd would not listen to him and continued their chant for about two hours. A civil authority then came and dismissed the assembly, urging the people to take the matter up in court. After the uproar, Paul encouraged the believers in their faith and continued on his journey.

When Paul wrote I Timothy, he was well aware of the idol worship of the goddess Diana and the effect of the culture on the Christians in Ephesus. Diana was a goddess of fertility and childbearing. She was believed to have the reproductive powers of men and all forms of life. The belief behind this goddess was that women were superior to males because of their ability to conceive, carry and birth children. In this culture in Ephesus, females were dominant over males. Diana is the Latinized form of the Greek word Artemis, yet the Artemis of Ephesus was not referring to the Greek goddess Artemis. This goddess was also identified with Cybele of the Phrygians. When the Greeks conquered this Asiatic area, they blended the civilizations, keeping the ancient idol worship.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/diana-artemis.html>

**Context.** When interpreting Scripture, it is always wise to read the context, the verse surrounding the passage we are seeking to understand. I would like to ask you to read I Timothy 2:13-15, the three verses that following out text. The first verse I want to point out is verse 15, and please keep the history of Ephesus in mind.

*I Timothy 2:15 “Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, holiness, with self-control.”*

In Ephesus, women who wanted children would pray to goddess Diana to help them conceive. Pregnant women would pray to her for an easy delivery. The people believe that childbearing gave women their value, their dominance. Paul contradicted the mythology and promised women they would be saved through faith in Christ and by living a life according to their faith in love, holiness, with self-control. Because we understand the history of Ephesus, we can understand why this verse is tied in with its surrounding verses. Now let's look at verses 13 and 14.

*I Timothy 2:13 “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.”*

This verse is addressing originality for the purpose of debating the idea that women are the originators of life. Many Ephesians believed women were superior to the male gender because of their ability to have children. Paul disagreed with their teaching, but Paul did not teach that the male gender was superior to the female gender. Remember in Galatians 3:28 Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

*I Timothy 2:14 “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.”*

This verse is pointing out that the first woman was the first to fall into transgression. Again, Paul is going back to Genesis to debate the idea about origin and authority. Paul is not trying to put all women under the authority of all men based on Eve's deception. Paul is not saying that women are less intelligent or more gullible than men. I don't believe it is a comparison at all. I believe Paul is making the point that one gender is not superior to the other. Let's go back to our text, verses 11 and 12.

*I Timothy 2:11-12 “(11) Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. (12) And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.”*

The first point I would like to make is that the Greek word for woman is the same word for wife. In I Timothy, Paul is not referring to the female gender, but to a husband and wife relationship. The Bible is clear that a husband is in authority over his wife in the marriage relationship and in the home. In these matters, the husband should lead from his heart. He should seek God for guidance and help in serving his family. However, we need to be careful that this truth about a husband leading from the spirit in the *home* is not taken so far as to say that he is the spiritual authority over his wife's *heart*. Each person can have a personal and direct relationship with God through Jesus Christ that isn't dependent upon a man, a husband, a pastor, a teacher, or any other person. I only mention this because I have met women who felt their personal relationship with God has suffered because of false expectations she has put on her husband. I have also encountered spiritually abusive relationships where the man uses God to dominate and control his wife. Let's stay away from false doctrine.

## *Should Women Be Silent in Church?*

In addition, concerning the church in Ephesus, Paul writes in Ephesians 5 about the marriage relationship, teaching them what it means for a husband to be in authority over his wife. He is to be like Jesus in the sense that he loves her, cares for her, includes her, values her, and serves her as he leads their home and marriage relationship. Paul was not using the reference to Christ to say that a husband should have the responsibility to be his wife's spiritual teacher or leader. This is taking the reference to Christ out of context, and applies unusual and unauthorized pressure on a husband.

Some have gone as far as to reference the husband as a priest of his home. A priest is a mediator, a go-between. Again, a wife or a woman does not need a husband or a man to represent her before God. Also, this term gives the idea that a husband has a different spiritual rank than his wife, a principle that some people that the male gender has over the female gender. The Bible says we are joint-heirs and a couple should learn the beauty of partnership and seeking God together. In matters that concern the home, the husband does have authority that should be spirit-led; however, that rank does not apply to his wife's personal relationship with God, a relationship that supersedes any human relationship. A husbandly priesthood is nowhere to be found in scripture. If you are in a relationship with anyone who tries to take authority over your personal relationship with God, that is error and can lead to strange doctrine.

Furthermore, the Bible does not teach that the husband is to be his wife's spiritual covering. A woman is first a child of God, whether she is married or not. That relationship with God is separate from any human relationship and it takes precedent over any human relationship. While it is true that submission to authority is obedience to God and will align a person for blessing, the idea that a husband is her spiritual authority is not a Bible doctrine. The idea that a husband is responsible for her spiritual protection and blessing suggests that she can't be protected or blessed on her own. Along these lines, I have even heard it taught that a single woman must come under the umbrella of her pastor since she does not have a covering of her own. I have heard it said that a woman married to an unsaved man should look to her pastor to be her spiritual covering because her husband is not in a pyramid of authority underneath God. This is false doctrine. The Bible does not teach that a woman must have a man to cover her in order to protect her or to cause her to receive from God. Jesus is the Lord of a woman's heart, and she can go directly to Him.

The second point I would like to make concerning verse 12 is that the word for silence in the Greek means to be harmonious. The Greek word *hesychia* (#2271) comes from a root word meaning "tranquil or in harmony." (See also I Peter 3:4). Paul is instructing the wife to be in harmony with her husband rather than to lord over him as an instructor, as in a person who is in a superior position to a student. The culture in Ephesus embraced the idea that women were to rule over men. Paul is confronting this false idea; he is not telling women that they are to be silent in church or that women are not to teach.

Let's take another look at this passage: *1 Timothy 2:11-12* "(11) *Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. (12) And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.*" In verse 12 Paul says that a woman should not "have authority over a man." The Greek word for "have authority" is *authenteo* (#831), which means, "to claim to be the author or originator." Referring to the history of Ephesus, there was the idea that women were to dominate men based on being the originator of men through motherhood. Paul was specifically addressing this issue and instructing women not to dominate the males or claim to be the originator of life.

Paul also said that women were not to teach men. The Greek word here is “didasko (1321)” and it means, “to discharge the office of a teacher, conduct oneself as a teacher.” Just as a husband or a man is not in a spiritual office or position based on gender, neither is a woman or a wife to lift herself up over the male gender as their authority. Again, understanding the context, the church in Ephesus needed to be taught about God’s truth that would set them free, and they needed to be corrected on false ideas that kept them bound.

Now let’s take a look at I Corinthians 14:34-35. We’ve already established that in other Scripture, Paul was an advocate of women in ministry; however, these two verses also seem to contradict Paul’s otherwise acceptance of women teaching or leading.

***I Corinthians 14:34-35** “(34) Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. (35) 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.”*

**History.** Paul was writing to the church at Corinth (see Acts 18). Paul’s first ministry in Corinth was in the synagogue, to the Jews. Every Sabbath, Paul would go to the synagogue and reason with the Jews about the Christ. Most of the Jews opposed Paul, but the ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, believed. Many of the Gentile Corinthians listened to the Gospel and accepted Christ. The following in Corinth was a mixture of both Jews and Gentiles. Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and six months. He planted the church in Corinth before he planted the church in Ephesus. While in Ephesus, Paul received news that the church was becoming divided into factions. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians seems to be written in response to questions from the believers there.

**Paul answers a question about order.** In I Corinthians 14, read from verse 26 through 40. It seems Paul is addressing a question concerning orderly conduct in church services, and within the passage about order, he addresses husbands and wives. Verse 40 seems to sum up this last section, saying,

*I Corinthians 14:40 “Let all things be done decently and in order.”*

At the beginning of this section, in verses 26-32, Paul addresses disorderly conduct concerning the way people were publicly sharing. Some people wanted to share a song, others a teaching, others a supernatural message in tongues (unknown language), others a revelation, and others a prophecy. Apparently people were shouting things out without any order. Paul writes in verse 33:

*I Corinthians 14:13 “For God is not the author of confusion (disorder) but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.”*

We know that Paul’s topic of order lasts from verse 26 through 40 because we see in verse 39 Paul mentions prophecy and tongues again:

*I Corinthians 14:39 “Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues.”*

## *Should Women Be Silent in Church?*

Also towards the end of this section, Paul seems to end the answer to the question on order with this summary in verses 37-38. Paul is bringing correction and is asking the people to receive what he is saying as true.

*1 Corinthians 14:37-38 "(37) If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord. (38) But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant."*

Sandwiched in the middle of this answer on order between verse 26 and verse 39 we find verses about husbands and wives, in the context of order in church services. Paul is answering a question about order. Remember in Corinth that there is a mingling of Jews and Gentiles in the congregation. In verse 34 we find the phrase, "as the law also says." The law says that women are not permitted to speak in church. In Jewish history, only men were allowed to read from the Talmud or publically speak. Also, in Jewish tradition, only men received teaching in the synagogue, not the women. The men would learn and then share it with their families. Again, this was a Jewish culture, not a New Testament culture. In verse 34, it mentions the phrase "as the law says." This is obviously a question regarding Jewish law and a new covenant church.

Verse 35 says that it is shameful for a woman (wife) to speak in church. They should ask their husbands at home. It seems the women were publicly asking questions in the middle of a service. It wasn't a matter of women teaching, prophesying, or sharing a song or revelation. It was a matter of order. It was about shouting out questions. Today we are not operating under Old Testament Jewish law in Corinth. Our culture has changed. Men aren't the only ones being taught the Word of God in a synagogue. However, it would still be out of order for anyone to shout out a question in the middle of a service, whether male or female.

Did Paul want women to be silent on the Word of God? Did Paul say that women should not become leaders for Christ? Paul was imprisoned, whipped, beaten, shipwrecked and left for dead to get the Gospel around the world. I don't think Paul ever meant for anyone, male or female, to stop preaching the Gospel based on his writings. I think Paul wanted men and women to work together in harmony.

*Romans 15:5-6 "May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Jesus, who is the head of the Church, said that the harvest was plentiful but the workers were few. What better way to stop the church from effectively reaping the harvest than to cut the laborers, who are few, down to half? When a person tells women they cannot speak and they cannot lead, then they think Jesus should stop half of His work force. He died for the world, why would we ever think Jesus would want any of us to be silent?

I think Paul and Jesus would both encourage any born again believer, whether male or female, to know their authority in Christ, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, to study the Word of God, to proclaim the Gospel, to disciple the nations, and to be a servant leader in any capacity that God calls him or her. The time is short. Instead of arguing about what we can't do, let's do what we can!