

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Women in the Church?

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. (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

In our divisive age when people from almost every different social group complain about their plight and blame someone else for their problems, this and another passage in Paul's writings have prompted some in the "Feminist" movement to accuse Paul of being anti-woman. In this accusation they reveal their historical ignorance of first century Roman culture, as well as of Paul's complete writings. Paul in no way denigrates women in or out of the church. He does define the culture of a godly New Testament church in terms far broader than gender. Earlier in this chapter (Verse 28) Paul directed that those in the church who could not communicate in a language familiar to the church also "keep silence" in the church. Paul devoted three comprehensive chapters in this letter to spiritual gifts in the church, carefully and precisely defining the godly, edifying role of every spiritual gift. Every gift is to function as the Lord directed, not as they personally wish or prefer. Any preacher who has been a pastor for any length of time has witnessed at least one instance of a man who feels himself called to preach but whose time in the pulpit simply does not validate his desire. Someone once described these frustrated and misguided souls, "They can't do what they want to do, and they won't do what they can do." A church member's true "Spiritual gift" is defined by what he can do, and do well, not by what he wants to do and can't do at all.

In the first sixteen verses of Romans 16, Paul sends personal greetings to various faithful believers in the Roman Church who have each uniquely blessed and aided him in his labors. The very first person mentioned is a woman, Phebe, whom Paul singles out for more words of commendation than any other believer in the list, including his direction that the Romans assist her in any way they can during her visit to Rome. Second in his list is a husband-wife "Team" of believers, Priscilla and Aquila. Did you notice that Paul names the "Missus" in this husband-wife team first? This and many other similar passages simply and convincingly refute the spurious charge that Paul hated women or that he in any way attempted to put them down.

In First Timothy 2:11-15, Paul specifically prohibits women from assuming a leadership role in teaching in the church. Folks who attempt to

defend women preachers will dismiss this passage as relating to a local custom of the day, claiming that Paul had no thought of permanently barring women from the pulpit or from other leadership teaching positions in the church. They have one glaring weakness in their argument. Instead of explaining his prohibition based on a regional custom, Paul based his argument on Adam and Eve, hardly a temporary or local custom. Many years ago I had an enjoyable and rather enlightening discussion with a pastor from another denomination who trumpeted his belief that women should be encouraged as pastors in the church. When I raised Paul's use of Adam and Eve, not at all logical if he intended to refer to a temporary regional custom of the day, the man quite honestly and sincerely responded, "I don't have an answer. You have raised the weakest point in my argument." Thank the man for his honesty at least.

While there can be no reasonable New Testament argument that contradicts these two passages, there is also a balanced and wise posture in Scripture that requires—demands—that men and the church as a whole body show righteous respect for the women in its membership. I've occasionally (Rarely, thankfully) encountered men who believed, that a woman should not speak even to call out a hymn in the congregational hymn singing portion of our public worship. I've asked these people, "Do you allow a woman to open the hymnal and to sing in the church?" In many churches, if these people enforced this extreme idea consistently with their words, they would immediately have to eliminate hymn singing from their worship agenda, for the few men in their church couldn't carry a tune or sing very many hymns. Paul didn't impose a blanket prohibition against women speaking in any way in the church, but rather against them assuming a teaching or leading role in the church. Sadly, many a deacon's wife or preacher's wife has destroyed her husband's profitable work in the church by trying to force her will and way onto his office and work, effectively being the real deacon or preacher, the proverbial "Controller behind the curtain." Without exception, these ambitious, but well meaning women eventually destroy their husband's service and benefit to the church. Folks, you can choose to ignore the Bible's teaching, but you cannot avoid

the consequences of that sinful course, for the Lord faithfully directs His blessings on those who obey, and just as faithfully withholds them from those who pretend and contradict His teaching.

Although Paul doesn't use the word "Submit" in this lesson, the idea and behavior is clearly present. In our "Me first or else" culture the word "Submit" is often regarded as a nasty, highly objectionable word, something to be avoided by any means possible, not as a commendable trait. I suggest that such rebellious believers spend a long soul-searching season with Paul in Ephesians 5. In Ephesians 5:21, Paul imposes a general rule of conduct, "*Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.*" Peter teaches the same truth.

*Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. **Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.** (1 Peter 5:5; emphasis added)*

This principle of submission or subjection in the Lord's church is not an objectionable idea or practice to be avoided or despised. It is to be honored and sought after by every member of a healthy, faithful church. The church member who struggles with submission to his/her brothers and sisters in the church likely needs to spend some serious quiet time in self-examination and repentance. Why would a believer reject, especially despise, the idea of submission? The likely and obvious answer relates to sinful pride. The believer with this mindset thinks that he/she knows more than those other believers, and has a mysterious and non-Biblical commission to lord his/her own ideas over the whole church. Such believers have forgotten that the Lord is "Lord" over His church. The church doesn't belong to him/her! We are each accountable to the Lord for our stewardship. He didn't resign His title-deed to the church and give it to the self-proclaimed lord over the church. In fact, Jesus repeatedly teaches that unfaithful stewardship results in the Lord taking that stewardship away from the unfaithful steward. More than a few times over the years I have witnessed the Lord's quiet removal of a problematic believer from his/her position of influence. Until the Lord neutralizes you, you've never known what real neutralizing means. Often the wise godly church will choose simply to quietly, peaceably ignore the would-be lord over their faith. "You are my brother/sister, and I love you in Christ, but you will not be my lord. I already have a worthy Lord who occupies that position in my life."

Let's think for a moment of Paul's teaching from a non-gender perspective. The New Testament teaches that every member of a faithful church labor to maintain precisely the same culture in the church that Paul describes in his words to women in our study passage. I suggest that, rather than denigrating women in these verses, Paul is rather

praising and elevating them. Because of her righteous influence over the men in her life, a woman occupies a unique position., including By her personal words and attitudes, she can powerfully influence the man in her life either to rancor or to peaceful joy. She can stir him into a senseless rage, or she can sooth him into a peaceful prince. She can nudge him to stubborn, mindless fulfillment of her private wishes, or she can remind him of the Lord's powerful teaching regarding "*Christ and the church,*" (Ephesians:5:32; this verse summarizes an extensive teaching in which Paul uses the husband-wife analogy to teach the spiritual truth regarding "*Christ and the church.*")

Rather than single out women and limit them to a role of inferiority, Paul in fact uses the women in this passage and throughout his inspired writings to set a godly example of wise grace and subjection that he teaches should characterize every member of a godly New Testament church. Peter's words above, "...all of you," covers a church's whole membership and culture. In no way did Peter restrict that lesson to women. The rampant pride of our social culture, when allowed to invade a church, will pit one member or group of members against another and recreate the same kind of destructive schism in a church that currently disables and is destroying our social culture.

When I have occasionally witnessed the controlling, domineering wife in action, especially in a church setting, I have considered posing the question, "At this moment, are you personally exemplifying Christ and His role over His church? How would the Lord's kingdom fare if He allowed His kingdom to function the way you are trying to manipulate your marriage and life?"

While Paul obviously intended his teachings to govern the church's culture, the fierce rejection that often appears against this teaching gives me pause. Perhaps the problem in our culture originates in the culture's rejection of the Biblical model of a godly marriage as much or more than its rejection of a godly church culture. Again, our present broken culture pits person against person, even to the intimate degree of husband against wife and wife against husband. Our culture would strongly reject Peter's description of a godly husband-wife team praying together, "*...as being heirs together of the grace of life.*" (1 Peter 3:7) In any healthy marriage, the husband is better at some tasks, and the wife is better at others. The wise couple will work out their united family life so that each person does what he/she does best. They cooperate; they do not constantly compete. "...heirs together" speaks volumes in describing the Biblical, godly relationship of a faithful, God-honoring marriage. Think about Paul's analogy of the church in the model of Christ and the church. The godly church doesn't foster a constant flow of competitive battles. It models cooperation and joyful harmony. The faithful believer doesn't constantly challenge and disagree with Jesus as

Lord and director of his life. He respectfully longs to obey and to love the Lord. Likewise, the godly marriage. I wonder. Could it be that the fierce objection in our culture to Paul's and to New Testament teaching regarding the role of women in a New Testament church is in fact a root objection to the Biblical description of a godly, "Christ and the church" kind of godly marriage relationship. How many marriages that crash and burn do so because the couple allowed a competitive, "I intend to one-up you at all cost" mindset instead of a Biblical and cooperative "heirs together of the grace of life" attitude?

It has been my observation in a number of failed marriages that one of the partners often becomes obsessed with outdoing—competing with and defeating—the other partner. In any competitive relationship, there must be a winner and a loser. In a cooperative relationship, the parties either win or lose together, but they work hard for each other, not for self. In the competitive relationship, the other partner cannot control the competitor, so he/she will either join in the destructive competition or try harder and harder to work enough at the marriage for both partners to salvage the relationship. However, no one can be faithful and obedient for another person. A healthy marriage is definitely one situation in which "*For every man shall bear his own burden.*" (Galatians 6:5) In the Christ-and-the-church model, Jesus faithfully and sacrificially did what the Father assigned Him to do—and He as fully and faithfully agreed to do—for His "Bride." And Paul's teaching directs the church and wives to be just as faithful and just as sacrificial for their husbands. When both husband and wife follow the self-sacrificing, loving model of Christ and the church, you will see a healthy, joyful, and—more importantly—a God-honoring marriage.

In similar fashion, when the members of a local church understand the "Christ-and-the-church" model, along with the, cooperative, non-competitive spirit that such a model requires, they will grow a healthy, joyful, and peaceful church family in the model of Christ and the church, Paul's true lesson here. In Paul's teaching, the godly woman who "...*keeps silence*" in the church will wield far greater influence than the loud or manipulative woman who demands her way in the church or the woman who strives to quietly manipulate her husband or others in the church.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor