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### The Biblical Limitations of Women in the Church

From the time the church began there have been questions and problems concerning nearly every facet of the Christian religion. Congregations had to be reprimanded and instructed concerning several difficult topics. Thankfully, they had the inspired apostles alive and well to write to them specifically and instruct them concerning how they should or should not act. The apostles made visits to several of the congregations of the church during their time and also made it a regular practice to write to them concerning their behavior and their reputation. We have those collected writings in the Bible, and Christians today are able to read the letters from the apostles and understand the will of God for themselves today. The apostle Paul wrote to the churches on a great many subjects, including the limitations which are placed on women in the church. God has roles for both men and women in the church, and they are distinctly different. Paul writes to Timothy and the Ephesian church and to the Corinthian church concerning the role of the women in those congregations and placed five specific limitations on them.

The first limitation is stated in 1 Timothy 2:8 where Paul says, “Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.” At first glance this verse seems like a simple command given to men. This verse does give a command to men, but in the same breath it limits women. By stating “I want the men in every place to pray”, Paul is limiting the Christian women from praying when Christian men are present. When Paul says the “men” are to pray in every place, he is talking specifically about the male gender. The fact that this command is given to men, and women are excluded, makes this a restrictive statement

concerning women. The statement could just as well read “men are to pray in every place, and women are not to pray in every place”.

This passage should not be taken to mean that women cannot pray or that they are never to pray in any place (Nichol 147). Paul is telling men to pray in every place, but he is not restricting women from ever praying, there are simply some settings in which they are not to pray. Based on 1 Timothy 2:12-15, women ought not to pray out loud when a Christian man is present. If, however, a woman is in a gathering of other Christian women this verse would not restrict any of the women from praying out loud with each other. This verse only restricts women from praying out loud when Christian men are present.

The argument has been made that women can pray when it is in a youth devotional, especially when a “chain prayer” is being performed. For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with a “chain prayer”, it is where several Christians join hands in a circle and one begins to pray and then “passes the prayer” to the next by a gentle squeeze of the hand. In this way the prayer is passed from person to person until all in the circle have had the opportunity to pray out loud in the presence of one another. Does this change the instruction concerning Christian women and when they are or are not supposed to pray? A person would be hard pressed to find a scriptural way to defend the position that this practice is allowed by scripture. 1 Timothy 2:8 clearly commands men to pray in every place, and not women. Women are not to pray when a Christian man is present, since he has been commanded to pray. God has stated His desire concerning public prayer, and that desire is that men pray in every place. Women ought not go against God’s desire in this regard. Calling it a “chain prayer” does not change the fact that Christian women are praying out loud in the presence of Christian men, and are taking the lead in the prayer. The

only biblical precedent sets the standard that women are not to pray in the presence of Christian men, but that God desires the men to take that role.

The second limitation is given in 1 Timothy 2:9-10, “Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness.” Some defining of terms is in order to properly understand this passage. The word Paul uses translated “adorn” is defined “to put in order so as to appear neat or well organized” and “to cause something to have an attractive appearance through decoration” (Arndt). Both of these meanings are important when considering the limitation being placed on women in the church. Women are to make themselves appear neat or well organized with proper clothing. The clothing is modified by “modestly and discreetly”. These words draw a picture of clothing which does not draw attention to the one wearing it. The Christian woman is not to wear clothing which attracts undue attention to her. Paul makes his point even clearer with his next phrase, “not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments”. This phrase is one which applies to their specific culture. Paul is not condemning braided hair, gold, pearls, or costly garments in any and every time period. In the time period Paul is dealing with these were things which would be immodest for a woman claiming godliness to do. Using the definition previously given for modest, one can easily see that, in this culture, braided hair, gold, pearls, and costly garments would have all drawn attention to the one wearing them, making them immodest for a Christian woman to wear.

In today’s culture, undue attention is not drawn by a woman who has her hair braided. In the same way, many women wear small amounts of gold or silver jewelry, pearls, or clothes that may be slightly expensive. These things do not necessarily draw attention to the woman who

wears them. This does not, however, negate the command which Paul is giving. In whatever culture the Christian woman exists there will be standards and limits concerning how much jewelry or how expensive looking the clothes can be before they begin to draw attention to the woman wearing them. It seems that in almost every culture there is a push for women to dress in such a way that she is viewed as a tool for physical gratification (Richards 834). Paul is commanding women to go against this trend and make themselves a godly example and make herself attractive by doing good works, which, Paul says, are fitting for a woman claiming godliness. Paul is giving the women commands on how to make themselves beautiful in God's eyes (Arichea 54). Whenever the clothing or jewelry or hairstyle the woman is wearing begins to draw attention to her, they become immodest.

Rather than making herself attractive by wearing clothing or jewelry which brings attention and prying eyes toward her, the Christian woman is to make herself attractive by the good works which she does. The Christian woman is told to remove that which is drawing attention to her physically, and rather adorn herself with that which makes her attractive spiritually. By doing good works and keeping herself modest in her clothing, the Christian woman becomes very attractive to a true Christian man.

The third limitation is stated in 1 Timothy 2:11, "A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness." Again, some defining of terms is in order. The word Paul uses for "quietly" is defined as "a state of quietness without disturbance, quietness" and "state of saying nothing or very little, silence" (Arndt). Some have said that the word Paul uses here and in 1 Corinthians 14 both mean absolute silence, but a look at the definitions of the words used will easily place them in a rightful place in the mind (Prohl 34). Paul is not talking about the women making no sound, but rather is making a statement about their general manner

or their way of conducting themselves. The word Paul uses for “submissiveness” is defined as “submissiveness, as opposed to setting oneself up as controller” (Arndt). Christian women ought to receive instruction without speaking out so as to take control of the setting she is in, when a Christian man is present. This passage is not suggesting that women are not knowledgeable about biblical topics or that they do not have the spiritual ability to speak well, but it is making a distinction that she is to be non-disruptive and receive instruction from Christian men (Richards 834). A Christian woman may very well have the ability to teach and may be very well versed in the teachings and implications of the Bible, but the Holy Spirit through Paul is commanding all Christian women to be the ones who are receiving instruction without being too disruptive and without taking control of the discussion.

The fourth limitation is found in 1 Timothy 2:12, “But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. Not quite as much defining of terms is necessary here, but some is necessary. The word Paul uses for “teach” has some measure of authority attached to it, which is accentuated by his second command “or exercise authority over”. Paul is making a very clear statement concerning women here. They are never to exercise authority over a Christian man in teaching. This fits in with the verse just prior, where a woman is to learn quietly and with complete submissiveness. Not only is she to learn without disrupting the direction and control of the discussion, but she is also never to exercise authority over or teach with authority a Christian man. Women are not restricted from teaching by the example which they set, but they are limited by this passage and 1 Corinthians 14 in their teaching in words and audible form. These passages keep women from preaching and teaching in front of Christian men in every circumstance (Kellogg 142).

Some have argued the point that a woman is not restricted from teaching Christian men in a one-on-one setting, and is even expected to teach a Christian man in such a setting if she is the more knowledgeable one of the two (Green 45). The example which is used to justify this point of view is that of Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18:24-26. In this passage, Apollos was teaching powerfully concerning Jesus and the doctrine which he knew. Apollos, however, had not been informed Jesus had established His church on earth and that all were to be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. This is evidenced by the words in verse 25, “being acquainted only with the baptism of John”. He was speaking boldly and powerfully about that which he was knowledgeable in the scriptures and concerning Jesus and John’s baptism, but two Christians heard him and made a decision to provide him with better information, or to teach him. Their names were Priscilla (female) and Aquila (male). The fact that Priscilla’s name is mentioned first in the Greek text is more significant than an English thinking mind would first think. In English, it is not such a big deal to place names in any order we desire, with no consideration given to the order and whether or not there are any implications of authority or control. The Greek thinking mind is not this way, however. Greek thinking minds usually placed the name of the more dominant one of the group first. In this case, then, the reader is led to believe that Priscilla was the more dominant of the couple who took Apollos aside and taught him more accurately. The argument then becomes, since nothing is said about Priscilla having sinned by teaching Apollos in an authoritative way, how can it be wrong for a woman of any time and culture to teach a Christian man the will of God more accurately if she takes him aside?

This argument has one single, major flaw. The text clearly shows that Apollos was not a Christian. Apollos had no knowledge of baptism into Christ’s church, and because he did not have knowledge of baptism into Christ for the forgiveness of sins it is safe to infer that he had

not been baptized into Christ. One would find himself hard pressed to believe that which he has not heard (Romans 10:14). Apollos, then, by simple logic and correct dealings with the scriptures we have, was not a Christian man. This is the single, major flaw within the argument that because Priscilla was taking the active, dominant role in teaching Apollos, women in every time are able to teach a Christian man and have authority over him as long as they are not in a setting of more than one-on-one. Apollos was not a Christian man, and so their argument comes to a moot point. Nobody is able to argue from this verse that a woman is able to teach a Christian man one-on-one, because the passage does not support that teaching.

Some will argue that these limitations only apply to the formal worship setting, not to devotionals, Bible camps, or smaller gatherings among Christians. Is this true? What about when Christian men and women are simply enjoying one another's company, having a meal together and relaxing afterward and discussing spiritual matters? Does this teaching apply to these situations as well? Some will say this teaching does not apply to those situations, since they are a private setting and not out in the open where many could observe them. This teaching, however, is not simply meant to be applied to the formal worship of the church. Consider some implications of accepting this view.

If a person accepts that the instructions given here are only meant for the formal worship service, that would mean that in 2:9-10, when Paul tells the women to adorn themselves with modest clothing that they only need to do this in the formal worship service. In today's world, that would mean they need to dress with clothing which covers their body and is not drawing attention to them when they are in worship services, but the second worship ends they could switch to their clubbin' dress with a slit from neck to naval. In fact, they would not be remiss to wear that outfit under their modest clothing and simply slip off the modest clothing when

services are officially finished. Furthermore, women could come to devotionals and smaller gatherings of Christians wearing bikinis and no other coverings. They would have no reason to dress any other way than that which they deem as comfortable and easy. Hopefully this strikes a chord of absurdity within the mind of the Christian. If not, consider the meaning of 1 Timothy 3:15.

In 1 Timothy 3:14-15, Paul tells Timothy that he “hopes to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.” This letter is written so that Christians will know how to conduct themselves in God’s household, in the church. Are Christians only members of the church when formal worship begins? Is Christianity a change in lifestyle only during formalized meetings of the church? The answer to both questions is no. When a person becomes a Christian, they leave their sinful self in the grave and are raised to be slaves to Christ, not slaves to sin (Romans 6:6). Every second of the life of a Christian ought to be marked by righteousness. Christians should be recognized as those who are allowing the goodness and rightfulness of Christ to live through them, and never should they be referred to as a people who are immoral or worldly in their approach to life in general (Galatians 2:20). So what does Paul mean when he says he is writing so they will know how to conduct themselves in the household of God, which is the church?

Christians are members of the church at all times, and so instructions are being given to them concerning how they ought to conduct their lives, whether they are in the formal worship service of the saints or if they are with Christian or non-Christian friends walking down the street. Once a person makes the decision to become a Christian and is baptized they have accepted the rules God has placed in His household. Since a Christian is always in the church,

then they are always a member of the church, and are thus always accountable to the rules which God has set forth for those who want to remain in His household. Every Christian is allowed to leave the church, but they are not permitted to change any of the rules which God has set forth for His church. The limitations placed on women in these verses apply to their entire life.

Looking back to the first question, do the limitations placed on women apply to every gathering of the church, no matter how formal or informal, the only biblical way to answer that question is with a definitive, “Absolutely they do”. Christian women are never to exercise authority over Christian men concerning biblical teaching.

After the limitations are placed on women, Paul tells Timothy why they are there in 1 Timothy 2:13-15. Paul makes his point by going back to the creation of man and woman. Man was created first, woman second. Adam was not the one who was deceived by the serpent, but rather it was Eve who was deceived. Paul seems to be drawing a picture which shows women as being more easily deceived, naturally, than men. Women are more emotional and are more susceptible to deception than men are, because men tend to be more logical in their thought processes. Paul then states that women will be saved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint. This indicates that women will be saved if they carry out the purpose that God has for them in the home, bearing children, and by continuing in faith, love, and sanctity with self restraint. Continuing in faith points toward their trust in God’s knowledge and plan for themselves in the church, that they are to obey all the things previously mentioned, and by doing that God will save them.

The fifth limitation is found in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, “The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is

improper for a woman to speak in church.” In the context surrounding this passage, Paul is talking about spiritual gifts and how they ought to be organized in the formal assembly of the saints. Most importantly, he is talking about the formal assembly of the saints in which they would hear revelations from God through different members who had the gift of prophecy. This verse speaks directly and specifically of women in the formal assembly of the saints remaining silent, meaning “to keep silent, do not speak, say nothing” (Arndt). The women are not to speak at all in the assembly especially concerning the gift of prophecy where they would have control of the assembly. They ought to remain silent when the prophecy is taking place and when teaching and preaching is taking place in that formal assembly. This is not something that was to be a one-time instruction, but it was to apply to the way services were conducted from that point on (Pulpit Commentary 34).

This verse in 1 Corinthians speaks directly against having women who are preaching in the assembly. They are not to teach or preach when the church is assembled to hear preaching or teaching, but rather are to remain silent.

The verses in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 place five limitations on women. Women are not to pray in the presence of male Christians, women are not to dress in such a way as to attract attention to themselves, women are to receive instruction quietly with complete submissiveness, women are not to teach or exercise authority over a Christian man, and women are to be silent when it comes to preaching in the formal assembly. Women who do these things will be well pleasing in the sight of God and will be well pleasing in the sight of a truly Christian man. Women who do not keep themselves within these limitations are rejecting God’s plan for the church and are not keeping their faith in Him.

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