

The Role of Women in the Local Assembly

by David A. Huston

This paper is presented to provide a biblical perspective on the range of ministries for women in a local assembly.

*And the twelve were with Him, and certain women...
who provided for Him from their substance.*

Luke 8:1,3

WOMEN CAN SERVE IN A LOCAL ASSEMBLY in a wide variety of very important ways. Here are a few biblical examples. The Bible says of Tabitha, “This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did” (Acts 9:36). Concerning Philip the Bible says, “Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied” (Acts 21:9), clearly a fulfillment of Acts 2:17, which says, “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy....” Romans 16:1-2 says, “I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea...for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.” And Romans 16:6 says, “Greet Mary, who labored much for us.”

In 1 Timothy 5:10, Paul instructed Timothy that a widow may be supported if she is “well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints’ feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work.” In Titus 2:3-5, Paul instructed Titus that older women should be “teachers of good things—that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.

In our assembly we have women involved in leading and teaching both children and other women. We also have women who prophesy, testify, evangelize, lead prayer, and teach, both in home groups and in congregational settings. Many of our women are involved in various service ministries and in the behind-the-scenes planning for various activities. In short, we believe that women can be involved in just about every facet of church life with the exception of pastoral oversight. Here are ten reasons why we believe that women cannot serve in oversight.

1. The Bible does not specifically authorize women to serve in oversight.
2. The twelve apostles, who served as the original overseers of the Jerusalem church, were all men.
3. The Bible makes no references to any women serving in oversight.
4. The Greek words translated “elder,” “overseer,” and “pastor” are found only in the masculine gender.
5. Paul wrote, “And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence” (1 Timothy 2:12). This is a reference to the oversight function, which involves authoritative teaching.
6. 1 Timothy 3:1 says, “If a **man** desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.”
7. 1 Timothy 3:2 says, “A bishop then **must be...the husband of one wife....**”
8. 1 Timothy 3:4-5 says, “One who rules **his own house** well, having **his children** in submission with all reverence (for if a **man** does not know how to rule **his own house**, how will **he** take care of the church of God?).”
9. The intimate relationship between elder/overseers and the open sharing of personal struggles that can take place in elder meetings would make the presence of women awkward and would tend to inhibit openness.
10. 1 Corinthians 11:3 says, “The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man.” In God’s order, women are not to exercise headship over men.

What About 1 Timothy 2:8-3:1?

There are two passages of Scripture which, upon first reading, seem to suggest that women should not speak at all in the meetings of a local assembly. The first is 1 Timothy 2:9-3:1, which says,

“In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, 10 but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works. 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. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. 15 Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control. 3:1 This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.”

The work of a bishop (literally *overseer*) involves teaching and exercising authority within the sphere of a local assembly. Paul did not permit women to serve in this capacity. This does not rule out all teaching roles; it simply rules out the role of teaching in an oversight capacity. Paul was explaining why this was necessary when he wrote that even though Eve was the second one formed, she was the first to fall. She was deceived, but Adam was not. Because of this, God told Eve, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16).

The issue Paul was discussing in this passage was not whether or not women could speak at all, but what leadership structure is proper for a local assembly. He was not ruling out the possibility that a woman may have insights and understandings that would bless and edify the assembly. He was simply saying that because women are more easily deceived than men, they are not to serve as the overseers of an assembly. This principle is reiterated in Paul’s declarations that the head of woman is man and that wives are to be subject to their husbands.

The Mystical Pulpit

One reason that some people have difficulty with allowing women to speak to the assembly from “behind the pulpit” is because, in their minds, the pulpit is synonymous with the exercise of authority. In other words, whoever stands behind a pulpit is exercising the “authority of the pulpit.” But that is Roman Catholic mysticism. A pulpit is nothing but a piece of furniture upon which the speaker can set a Bible and some notes. Authority is in the speaker, not where he or she happens to be standing.

The same man who wrote that women should be in silence also wrote, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs...” (Colossians 3:16). This verse, which can have application in both teaching and leading worship, is certainly not limited to men.

The phrase “to be in silence” is troublesome for some. The New International Version of the Bible says it this way, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” (1 Timothy 2:11-12). This is not a command to absolute silence;

only silence with respect to teaching and exercising authority over men. What Paul is saying is simply, “No female pastors.” To deprive the people of God of the gifts and experience of mature godly women on the basis of this passage is stretching the interpretation of Paul’s words far beyond what they were intended. Paul was not prohibiting women teachers; he was only saying that women must function in submission to male authority.

What About 1 Corinthians 14:27-36?

The second passage that seems to suggest that women should not speak at all in the meetings of a local assembly is 1 Corinthians 14:27-36, which reads,

If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. 28 But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. 29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. 30 But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. 31 For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. 32 And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. 33 For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. 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” (1 Corinthians 14:27-36)

To understand this passage it is important to note that 1 Corinthians 11:5 says, “But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...” Clearly women were allowed to prophesy in the Corinthian church. But they were also told not to speak and to be submissive. The application of that command was, “And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home.” In other words, the speaking pertained to asking questions during a meeting. This prohibition is not a requirement of absolute silence, but rather an instruction not to be interrupting the meeting by talking and asking questions.

In verse 28 Paul instructed those who give a message in tongues which is not followed by an interpretation to “keep silent in church.” He then said in the very same sentence, “And let him speak to himself and to God.” Here we have a command to both keep silent and to speak. This shows plainly that the instruction to keep silent has a limited application which must be determined by the context.

In verse 30 Paul instructed, “But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent.” Again, this is not a command to total silence, only to silence

in the context of orderly prophetic utterances. The very next verse says, “For you can all prophesy one by one,” which certainly includes the women of the assembly. The purpose of these spoken messages was “that all may learn and all may be encouraged” (v.31). Paul follows this statement by addressing the disorder that is taking place by those who are learning, not those who are speaking.

When Paul wrote, “For it is shameful for women to speak in church,” he meant that it is shameful to disrupt a meeting by talking. He had just said in 1 Corinthians 14:33, “For God is not the author of confusion but of peace....” And a few verses later he said in 1 Corinthians 14:40, “Let all things be done decently and in order.” Paul was not discussing participation in 1 Corinthians 14 but order.

The whole point of this passage is that the meetings of the Corinthian assembly were out of order and full of confusion. The statement about women being silent cannot be understood as meaning they were forbidden to minister verbally in any capacity—clearly they were permitted to prophesy. It only means that women must not add to the confusion and disorder by talking and asking questions during the meetings.

Paul’s prohibitions against women speaking and teaching are very limited. Women cannot teach men in an authoritative sense but must function under authority. This means that women may not teach as part of the pastoral leadership team. But there are no prohibitions against women preaching, evangelizing, exhorting, leading worship, encouraging, testifying, explaining, sharing insights, or teaching expositionally from the Scriptures, as long as they do so in submission to their husbands and the pastoral overseers of the assembly.

Note to the reader:

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