

A Woman's Place in Christ

✘ The Bible says in Galatians 3:28 that because of what Christ has done, there are no longer any differences among us. “There is neither Jew nor Greek” (no ethnic or national difference); “neither slave nor free” (no economic difference); “neither male nor female” (no gender difference), “for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus” (NKJV). This verse refers to the equality we have in God.

But if we are all equal, how is it that the church has so often been guilty of sanctifying a chauvinistic system in which women are put—and not always gently—in second place? I believe it is time for us to revisit the issue of what a woman's place is in God's order of things.

My purpose is not to incite every woman in the church to rise up to assert her individuality, authority and rights. It is to examine what the Bible says a woman can be so that women are free to move into all the things God has for them.

Casting Off Old Ideas

I want to begin by declaring that my view of women is not a radical feminist or anti-traditional church view. It is a solid biblical view. This view holds that God has a high destiny for every one of the redeemed—whether male or female—and that that

destiny is the blossoming of who they are in the created being of Jesus Christ.

But discovering who we are in Christ can be made difficult by the old ideas we cling to that originate from the culture around us, imposed systems of thought such as human or religious philosophy, or our own ignorance or misunderstanding. We must allow the Lord to deliver us from all preconceived notions in order to discover His true call on our lives.

One way to do that is to examine closely the Scriptures that many people use to dispute the role of women in the church and try to determine what God is really saying through them. To that end, we will look at 1 Timothy 2:8-15:

“I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; 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, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works.

“Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into

transgression.

“Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control.”

First let’s see what the different verses in this passage don’t mean.

That the women adorn themselves in modest apparel (v. 9).

“All women should dress as crummy as possible to verify their holiness.”

Let a woman learn in silence (v. 11). “Women should keep their mouths closed in church and have no input on spiritual matters.”

With all submission (v. 11). “Women should do as they’re told.”

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man (v. 12). “Women are allowed to teach only other women.”

Adam was formed first, then Eve (v. 13). “God likes men more than He does women.”

Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression (v. 14). “Men are smarter than women.”

She will be saved in childbearing (v. 15). “The only thing a woman is good for is having babies.”

Are you guilty of interpreting any of the verses this way? Now let’s see what God is really telling us about women. We can’t analyze every verse, but we will look at a few of the most important ones.

Let a Woman Be Silent

The first thing we have to understand is that, in this passage, Paul is writing to Timothy to instruct him on how to lead a church. He is giving him counsel on how to deal with relationships within the body.

But we cannot divorce the counsel given here from what we find in other parts of Scripture. Elsewhere Paul mentions “women who labored with [him] in the gospel” (Phil. 4:3) and others, such as Priscilla and Phoebe, whom he recognizes as teachers and deaconesses (see Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:1,3,12). So he can’t be saying that women are to have no input regarding spiritual matters in the church.

In fact, let me begin by addressing verses 11-12: “Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.” These verses are commonly interpreted to mean that a woman is permitted to teach only other women; in particular, older women may teach younger ones, as Titus 2:4-5 suggests.

But if this is true, it is true only in the United States. As soon as a woman goes abroad as a missionary, she is allowed—even expected—to teach, and not just other women.

And what happens if she becomes a writer? We put no sign at the top of her articles warning men not to read them—“Caution: This article was written by a woman and could be hazardous to your spiritual

health.”

So why the dichotomy? Because the word “silence” is mistranslated in verses 11-12. The same word is translated “quiet” in a preceding verse (v. 2): “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life.”

You can’t take the word that is used in verse 2 to mean one thing and then claim it means something totally different in verses 11-12. And the two translations of the word are not interchangeable. It wouldn’t make sense for Paul to tell Timothy to pray that those in authority would take away the right to speak so that he could live a “silent” life, a life in which he never got to say anything.

What he is telling him, on the contrary, is to pray that he’ll have the kind of government that will allow his life to have a serene quality about it—a sense of peaceableness. In the same way, when Paul says let a woman learn in “silence” (really, “quiet”) he is making an appeal that has to do with the dynamics of male-female relationships in general. He is calling for peace between the genders in a church setting.

And women are to learn not only in a spirit of serenity, according to Paul, but also “with all submission.” Some people take the word “submission” to mean “subjection.” Subjection, or subjugation, is the term that defined the action of the ancient emperors when

they
would overwhelm an enemy and bring them under dominion.
“Submission” is
not even a remotely similar concept.

In real life, this erroneous idea of submission would
give us a picture of a wife who just keeps her mouth shut, no
matter
what her husband does or says. She would just bite her lip and
wait for
him to ask her, “Well, my dear, do you have anything to offer?
It’s
difficult to imagine you would, considering that I am primary
in the
purposes and mind of God and you are only secondary. But go
ahead.”

A more valid understanding of submission shows a wife who
says what she thinks in a very simple and open—not insistent
or
demanding—way, with a “gentle and quiet spirit” (1 Pet. 3:4).
Then she
trusts God to help her husband understand the value of
partnership—to
see that he and his wife are co-heirs in the life of God (see
Rom.
8:16-17)—and respond appropriately.

Serenity and submission are not characterized by
misty-eyed pacifism, but by the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy,
peace
and so on. A woman is not to insist on her rights; yet she
should be
free to express herself in a gracious way as she feels led. If
her
husband does not receive what she says, she must look to the
Lord to
take up her cause.

Suffer Not a Woman to Teach

If you look at verse 12 of 1 Timothy in the context of the whole Bible, you will see that Paul couldn't be prohibiting women from teaching, or even from teaching men. If he were, why would he give rules in another epistle for women to follow when they are prophesying? (See 1 Cor. 11:5.)

In that epistle, he is referring to prophetic utterances given in the midst of an entire congregation—one that includes men. And we know that prophecy can come by itself, or it can accompany either preaching or teaching. Therefore, Paul allows for the possibility of women speaking in church in the capacity of teacher.

The problem with this verse is similar to the one we found in verse 11: The Greek word translated here as "man"—anair—actually means "husband." So what Paul is really saying is that he doesn't allow women to push their husbands around, to try to seize their authority. He is addressing the natural tendency that women have had, since the fall, to clutch for the rule, or authority, that their husbands have been given over them (see Gen. 3:16).

You see, God did in fact give husbands authority over their wives; He made them head over their wives as Christ is head of the church (see Eph. 5:23). But this authority is not for the purpose

of quenching women into nothingness; rather, it is for husbands to act as releasing agents, doing everything possible to maximize their wives' potential and bring them into the highest possibilities of their created beings.

God's initial plan, of course, was for men and women to be equal. That's the way it can be in Christ, if men and women will submit to the redemptive process God has ordained. The redemptive process requires that the husband take leadership and the wife submit (see Eph. 5:22-24).

This is not the frightening proposition some women make it out to be. As I said before, submission is not subjugation; and it is not destructive to your personhood. It is a summons to relate properly to the different kinds of authority in your life, from the civil government to church leadership to your spouse.

In the ancient world, the word "submission" was a military term that referred to the ordering of soldiers in rank—the strategic placement of soldiers not only for marching but for going into battle. The soldiers were positioned in such a way that they were able to protect one another so that the likelihood of success was increased. It wasn't an issue of titles, or who was more important, but an issue of meeting the objective—victory.

That's the way it is with the military today. Individuals are positioned, both in practice maneuvers and in a real war, to best serve the overall purpose of winning. Each one keeps his place because he understands the need for order and the mutual benefit of the soldiers' covering one another.

A Woman's Place

So being in submission really means knowing and keeping one's place. But what is a woman's place?

It is not the rigid, chauvinistic, stay-in-the-background, keep-your-mouth-shut place sometimes offered her by the church. It is not the liberal, insist-on-your-own-rights place carved out by modern feminists. And it is not the rebellious, do-your-own-thing place defined by her flesh. It is the place of being obedient to the Word of God and allowing that Word to become incarnate in her by the work of the Holy Spirit so that Jesus happens in her.

How does a woman reach this place? Not by falling prey to the enticements of the culture around her. Not by seizing authority from her husband. And not by getting out of order. She attains it by relating rightly to all the authorities in her life, submitting in serenity and allowing the gifts of God to make room for her—knowing that as she obeys, God will cause the power of Jesus Christ to

work in
her situation so she can fulfill her destiny.

*Jack Hayford is the founding pastor of The Church on the Way
in Van Nuys, California.*