

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

13 Women Be Silent?

Scripture Reading

1 Corinthians 14:26 – 40, 1 Timothy 2:8 – 15

So Far

Two matters are touched upon in 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16: the wearing of head-coverings and participation in worship by women. Last week we thought about the first; tonight we will turn to the second.

Seems It's OK

When Paul says, in verse 5, "...every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head." he is apparently taking it for granted that the women of the church in Corinth will both pray and prophesy and there is nothing in the immediate context to suggest that it should be otherwise. And why should we question it? Is it not consistent with what was foretold by Joel?

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions."

Joel 2:28

But There's A Problem

But if we read on to chapter 14 Paul says:

"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. 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 14:34 – 35

Does this amount to a complete ban on women praying or prophesying when the Lord's people assemble for worship? If it does, how do we account for Paul's apparent acceptance of it in chapter 11?

There's More To Be Said

In answering these questions there is another passage we cannot ignore. We will not have time to dwell on it this evening but we should keep it in mind and we will return to it next week.

"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."

1 Timothy 2:11 – 14

Differing Views

Various interpretations of 1 Corinthians 14:34 – 35 have been proposed. Some are more plausible than others.

An Absolute Command

Some take these words as an absolute ruling that women should be seen and not heard whenever the church is assembled. Those who adopt this view must then be able to explain the apparent contradiction of 1 Corinthians 11 and this they do in one of two ways.

It could be argued that the passage dealing with the issue of head covering in chapter 11 does not refer to those times when the church is assembled for worship and so women are free to pray and prophesy on and only on other occasions. However there are problems with that idea.

- Paul's view of prophecy places it in the context of believers assembled together so that the words spoken may be evaluated.
- The language and tone of the passage seems to suggest that it does apply to church assemblies.
- The verses which follow immediately are clearly talking about when the church is assembled and whilst it may be said that Paul does not specifically say that the verses in question refer to the assembled church it could equally be said that he does not specifically say they do not, when the natural assumption would be that they do.

Furthermore we should bear in mind that the distinctions we tend to make between the church and other Christian gatherings would probably have been meaningless to the first century church. What then would be the occasions when it would be appropriate for a woman to pray and prophesy and why would Paul be concerned about the wearing of head coverings on those occasions and not when the church is assembled?

The alternative argument is that Paul's reference to prayer and prophecy in chapter 11 is by way of a reluctant concession along the lines: "Well if you really must pray and prophesy at least cover your head as a mark of respect to the men present." This seems to me far fetched but if it was the thought in Paul's mind it is to be expected that he would have said so.

A Local Application

The second group of interpretations of 1 Corinthians 14:34 – 35 depends on believing that it applies to a particular set of circumstances in Corinth at that time. It has been suggested that perhaps the women were being too noisy and had to be told to be quiet or that perhaps the women of Corinth were uneducated and unable to make helpful comments (though such evidence as we have would suggest otherwise). It may have been that they had misunderstood what was meant by freedom and equality in Christ and were stepping outside the conventions of decent society and bringing disrepute on the church.

It is then argued that Paul was merely counselling that the women be quiet as the best way to restore order and that his command had a specific and local application only but that there is an underlying principle which we can learn. It is hard to see what that underlying principle might be if it is not that women are somehow inferior and that all must be silenced because of the excesses of some.

A Corinthian Quotation

A third group of interpretations assumes that verses 34 and 35 are merely quoting back a statement taken from a letter sent to Paul by the Corinthian church listing matters they wanted him to address. Paul is reminding them of the question before he gives his answer which is a sharp, "What! did the word of God come originally from you?" — don't be ridiculous I have already told you what I think about women praying and prophesying. It is accepted that Paul does a similar thing in 6:12, 7:1 and 8:1 and there are those who find the same kind of quotes in other places (usually it is when Paul writes something they find hard to accept). But these verses do not fit the pattern well. This "quote" is much longer than the others, the others are followed by a long reasoned response whereas this one is not and elsewhere the response is unambiguous but here it is not clear what the response is. The language experts tell us that the structure of verse 36 is such that it is very unlikely to be a refutation of the preceding verses.

Only Married Women Need To Be Quiet

A fourth interpretation sees the restriction as applying to wives only. Perhaps the wives were embarrassing their husbands by criticising them in public or by taking a more prominent role than them. Given the social climate of the time, if this is what was in Paul's mind it is likely that he would have come to the conclusion that if married women should be silent how much more should single women for in those days it would have been even more unseemly for a single woman to speak out of turn.

Maybe We Should Go With The Flow

All of the above interpretations share a common weakness. None of them explains why these words should be found where they are in the context of a passage that deals with prophecy and tongues. This is an important consideration. So much so that many of the commentators go to great lengths to try and prove that these verses should either be placed elsewhere or disregarded as not being part of Paul's original letter. We reject that view because it is inconsistent with our view of Scripture but we do have to attempt to answer the question: why does Paul seem to interrupt his flow to add in what looks like an unrelated command?

Concern To Maintain Proper Order

The final interpretation for us to consider states that Paul's ruling is not that women may not pray or prophesy in the presence of the assembled church but that they must be silent when it comes to the oral evaluation of the prophecies of others. This view has a lot in its favour.

- It fits comfortably with the flow and structure of the passage which is dealing with the regulation and evaluation of prophecy (verse 29).
- It makes sense in the light of that clear principle we discerned in the first part of chapter 11. There is a social order which must be reflected in the behaviour of the Lord's people but for a woman to participate in the evaluation of authoritative teaching by any of the men would be to reverse that order. In particular if a wife were to criticise her husband's teaching she would undermine his status in way that even the pagan population of Corinth would have considered shameful.
- It helps us make sense of Paul's passing reference to the law in verse 34. What is the law Paul had in mind? There is no Old Testament law that commands women to be silent. Some suggest that he was thinking of the Torah, but Paul does not do that anywhere else. When he speaks about the law it is always the Old Testament scriptures he has in mind and there is usually some indication of what part of the law he means. If Paul had in mind the reference he made in chapter 11 to the order established at creation then he was turning our thoughts to the early chapters of Genesis which would be consistent with the view we are now considering.
- It is also consistent with the teaching of 1 Timothy 2:11 – 14, which we will return to next week, where the emphasis is upon women not taking authority over men.

So What Is It Teaching?

If we accept this last interpretation of the passage, what is it teaching?

It tells us that it is acceptable for women to prophesy in the presence of assembled believers. Prophecy is a broad category. It can be taken to apply to any Spirit prompted utterance. It could include anything from preaching to making a Spirit inspired comment on a passage of Scripture in the church Bible Study. But prophecy must be critically evaluated to establish that it is truly inspired and what the women must not do is appear to undermine the proper social order established by God at creation. That means they must not take part in public criticism of the authoritative teaching of the men.

I would go further than Paul goes in this passage, bringing in 1 Timothy 2:11ff, and say that when women do speak they must not do so in any way that gives the appearance that they are assuming authority over the men present. To my thinking that rules out preaching, which always ought to be done with authority.

Returning to 1 Corinthians 11, when the women do prophesy, they must do it in a way that makes it obvious that they are conscious of their position and respectful of the men present. Whether that is reflected in the wearing of a head covering or in the woman's attitude and demeanour you must decide.

Let's Be Positive

Let's not conclude this study with the focus on what women cannot do, for I do not believe that is where Paul's focus was when he wrote the passage we have been thinking about. Paul's purpose was to guide the church in Corinth into practices that would reflect proper order and with proper order there is freedom. There is freedom for women to exercise their God given gifts, of which they may have many (Proverbs 31), in a God glorifying way. So here is a question to think about. When and how do you believe it is appropriate for a Christian woman to prophesy?

Here are some verses you might want to consider.

- Philippians 4:2 – 3
- Romans 16:3, 1 Corinthians 16:19
- Romans 16:6 – 7, 12
- Romans 16:1 – 2
- Acts 21:9

Next Week

Next week we will return to look more specifically at 1 Timothy 2:8 – 15 with particular emphasis on the question, is it permissible for women to pray in our church gatherings?