

BEYOND THE TORN VEIL

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH – Nick Maartens

Introduction

Must women really be silent in church meetings where men are present ? Must they keep their heads covered ? Was Paul a misogynist ? The questions asked about the place and role of women in the church goes much deeper than just asking whether they must be silent in meetings where men are present or whether they should be allowed to teach and preach or whether they should be ruled by men. It involves the authority, integrity and infallibility of God's Word. A superficial reading of certain verses in the New Testament will disclose that there is an obvious contradiction of statements about what is said about women. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:5 we deduct from what Paul writes that women were used to prophesying in his time, whilst in 1 Cor 14:34,35 he seemingly contradicts himself by declaring that women should be silent in church. How can Paul in the matter of a few sentences totally contradict himself ? There must be some logical explanation. When it appears as if the Word of God speaks against itself the fault will always be found in either our flawed interpretation or in the fact that we are using a poor translation which conveys a wrong meaning.

An important principle of Bible exposition is to understand that one part of Scripture cannot contradict any other part of Scripture. Scripture must always confirm and explain Scripture. Contradictions or wrong interpretations question the infallibility of God's Word.

In discussing the women question it is not God's Word in the original languages that is questioned, but some translations and interpretations of it. It is thus of the utmost importance that each person should do everything in his or her power to find out for him or herself what the Scriptures really have to say. How unwise it would be if one is not thoroughly qualified in the original languages to rely on one's own understanding when it comes to controversial interpretations and obscure translations. Theologically speaking it is not necessary to re-invent the wheel. When one looks at all the written research that has been done one realizes that there is hardly a subject in the Bible which has not already been studied from all different points of view. Again it would be very unwise to make up one's mind before one has not thoroughly and honestly looked at what all the different scholars have to say about a certain topic.

Much of what the New Testament teaches is often not understood by modern Christians because of the way that most present day churches operate. It is no longer according to the model of the church we find described in the New Testament. The present institutional model of the church has been formed by the influence of centuries of man-made laws, practices, customs and traditions. Even among so-called "independent" groups the tradition is so strong that the model that is being followed is still that of the institution. To give an example: a leader of an independent fellowship writes that there is not one single verse in the Bible that talks about a female pastor running a church and that where men are present women are not allowed to minister. Obviously, as far as the female pastor is concerned, his framework of reference is the traditional church with its male pastor or minister in charge. About female pastors running the church, he is right, there are no scriptures to be found supporting such a situation, but for that matter, neither is there one to be found to support the idea that the church should be headed by a single male pastor/minister figure. In the New Testament we only read of multiple ministry and leadership. *"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...(Ephesians 4:10-16).*

In the New Testament model of the church every believer was encouraged to participate in ministry in open meetings. This is confirmed by what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:26-29: “*When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All this must be done for the strengthening of the church. If anyone speaks... Two or three prophets should speak...*” Surely the “*everyone*” in the above mentioned verse had to include women for those contributing had to do it for the strengthening of the whole church. Since when does the church consist of only men?

Evidence from both the Old and New Testaments prove that God used women to operate in the oral ministry of prophesying. We cite the following examples: Exodus 15:20 “*...Miriam the prophetess...*”, Judges 4:4 “*...Deborah, a prophetess...*”, 2 Kings 22:14 “*...Hulda the prophetess...*”, Nehemiah 6:14 “*...the prophetess Noadiah...*”, Isaiah 8:3 “*...I went unto the prophetess...*”, Luke 2:36 “*...Anna, a prophetess...*”, Acts 21:9 “*...He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.*”

Further references in the New Testament of women used in the service of the Lord is found in Romans 16:1 and in Acts 18:2.

In Romans 16:1 Paul writes the following about Phoebe: “I commend unto you Phoebe, our sister, who is *diakonos* of the church which is at Cenchrea.” The Greek word certainly refers to an office in the church, as in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8,12. The fact that the minds of many translators have been influenced in favour of male bias is shown by the way this Greek word has been translated. The NIV for example translates the word as “*servant*”, but at least provides a footnote where it is rendered as “*deaconess*”.

In Acts 18:24-26 there is also an account of Priscilla and Aquilla expounding the Word of God to Apollos.

There also seems to be a reference to women apostles in Romans 16:7. Chrysostom and Theophylact say that Junia was a woman.

Furthermore, in his sermon in Acts 2:17,18 Peter quotes from the book of Joel to explain the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that had just happened: “*In the last days, God says, I will pour my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy...Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit...and they will prophesy.*” It is clear that God makes no distinction between male and female when by the Holy Spirit He inspires somebody to speak forth His Word. In the New Testament sense prophesying includes speaking words of strengthening, encouragement and comfort to people (1 Corinthians 14:3). We have already mentioned the verse which confirms that women used to speak in meetings: “*And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head...*”(1 Corinthians 11:5). The whole discussion in 1 Corinthians 11 revolves around the conduct of men and women in meetings. To try and explain that the references to men and women in the context of 1 Corinthians 11 refer to two different types of meetings, one with only women present in which women could speak forth God’s Word and another for men only in which women were not allowed to speak is to force the meaning of the text to say something which it does not say.

According to the custom of those days women had to wear a head covering to honour their husbands who were present. Why should there be a need for head coverings if there were no husbands present ?

Studying the Hebrew terms used in Exodus 38:8 and also in 1 Samuel 2:22 some Bible scholars show that women served as priestesses in the tabernacle. Male Jewish prejudice against women caused them to tamper with these two scriptures. In the Septuagint version Jewish translators rendered Exodus 38:8 as “fasting women”, whilst omitting the entire phrase mentioned in 1 Samuel 2:22. Prof. Margoliouth of Oxford comments on this: *“It is evident that by the time when the Septuagint translation was made, the idea of women ministering at the door of the Tabernacle had become so odious that it was wilfully mistranslated.”*

In the light of all the evidence from both the Old and New Testaments which proves that women had public ministry, it is just common logic that the scriptures used by some expositors to “prove” that women should keep quiet in meetings where men are present must have another meaning that does not contradict what the rest of Scripture has to say about women.

What lies at the root of all the misinterpretations of the words of Paul concerning women?

It started with one of the most serious mistranslations made in the English version of the Bible. Dr. Bushnell in her book God’s Word to Women, devotes many pages studying the original Hebrew of Genesis 3:16 which in the NIV says the following: *“Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you”*. After an intense study of every individual Hebrew character found in Genesis 3:16 she comes to the conclusion that it does not contain a law to preordain the subordination of women as indicated in so many references in the margins of some versions of the Bible. The verb in this sentence is in the simple future form and not in the imperative mode (command form). It contains a warning and a prophecy of what will happen to women because of sin, a warning and a prophecy “of what has been abundantly fulfilled ...especially in heathen lands”, says Dr. Bushnell. Even in Christian churches women are suppressed into subordination by men who do not understand the Spirit of Christ and who wrongly interpret “ruling” as a law given in Genesis 3:16.

What is the New Testament meaning of the “headship” of the husband as found in 1 Corinthians 11:3-14?

“..and the head of the woman is man...”

The headship of the husband can be explained by analogy of Christ as the Head of the church. In Ephesians 5:22 we read that the husband should be the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church and that he must love her as Christ loved the church and must treat her in such a way to cause her to become a “radiant” bride (Ephesians 5:25-27). In what sense is Christ described as “head” of the church? Colosians 2:19 describes it best: Jesus is *“the head from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow”*. The Bible makes it clear that the husband should be head after the pattern of Christ to support and lift up his wife and help her grow to his own level. By reading Ephesians 5 we find the principle of true headship. True headship is won by self-sacrificing love, not by rule and domination. This principle is also illustrated by what Jesus taught about Christ-like authority: if anybody wants to be great, he must become a servant: *“You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over*

them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26). In Genesis 2:18 we read that God made a helper for Adam to complement him (Amp. Bible). That means together they will “complete” each other. Wise is the husband who will listen to his wife and children and who, in non-moral issues, puts his own interests last for the sake of serving his family and making them happy. The husband who understands this principle will truly have a wife who will fulfil the scripture: “...*the woman is the glory of man*”. Spiritually speaking, like elders, he is supposed to lead by example (Hebrews 13:7).

As far as roles are concerned men and women are different. Men cannot bear babies. During the time of pregnancy and after the birth of the baby, women are especially vulnerable and during this time of physical weakness they have to be cared for by their husbands. However, it does not mean that because marital roles are not the same that when it comes to ministering in the spiritual gifts of the Spirit that women should play an inferior role. Spiritually there is no distinction in the status before God between men and women: “*There is neither...male nor female...*” (Galatians 3:28).

Problematic scriptures

In the light of the evidence presented from both the Old and New Testament which proves that women had public ministry, it is just logical that the scriptures that some use to command women to keep quiet in meetings must have another meaning that does not contradict what the rest of Scripture has to say. One such verse is **1 Timothy 2:8-15** which says: “*I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man.*”

This is a very good example of a poor translation of the original. It is not the inferiority of women towards men in general that is being discussed in this passage, but the proper relationship of a wife towards her husband. Note that the verse does not say “women”, but “woman”. The Greek word *guné* means either “woman” or “wife”, depending on the context. Since it is used in the context of being in relationship with *andros*, meaning only “husband” and not “man”, it must be translated “wife” (*andros* is the genitive singular of *anér* which in the context means only “husband”). It must therefore be translated as “wife” (Zodhiates – *Hebrew Greek Key Study Bible*).

The Greek word *hésuchia* which is translated as “in quietness” or “in silence” (verse 11) is also used in 1 Timothy 2:2 where it is correctly translated as “peaceful”. The correct rendering should be: “Let the wife learn with an attitude of peace and tranquility under her husband.” The same word is used in 1 Peter 3:4 where referring to the attitude of Christian wives, it is translated as “a gentle and quiet spirit.” Zodhiates says in his Greek Study Bible: “It is unfortunate that it is translated as “silence” indicating muteness, the absence of talking.” All that Paul was saying was that a women should display a tranquil spirit while learning from her husband. Here we must bear in mind that in those days usually only men had the privilege of an education and culturally women were treated as second rate citizens.

Having cleared up the misconception of Genesis 3:16 which for generations has had men believe that they had a “law” from God to rule over women and which also influenced translators, we now understand that Paul’s instruction had a cultural setting of uneducated women.

What about the situation today? I am in fellowship with young unmarried Christian ladies who have been believers for many years. They are spiritually very mature and have a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. Imagine if one of them should get married to a man who has only recently got converted. Must she now keep her mouth shut and not share any teaching with him? Or should she contribute to helping him come up to her level of understanding the Scriptures as soon as possible? With a proper understanding of what the Bible really teaches the situation now poses no problem.

It is also helpful to note that nowhere in the above mentioned passage is a church meeting mentioned. Verse 8 does not say that men must lift up hands and pray without anger or disputing in meetings – it says they must do so “everywhere”. The same setting of the context is applicable to the reference made to wives in the rest of the passage. To make it applicable to church meetings only is to read into Scripture what it does not say.

What Paul is saying in verse 12 is that a wife should not habitually, whether in the house, a meeting, or any other place, want to rule and teach her husband. The word *authentain* means to act like a “dictator” or “absolute master” (The Complete WordStudy Dictionary - Spiros Zodhiates. Acting in such a way could give the impression that she was rebelling against the natural order that God had pre-ordained for a husband and wife.

It is also interesting to read about recent research that has been done by C.C.Kroeger on the meaning of the word *authentain*, normally translated “to exercise authority over” (1 Timothy 2:12). The study shows that this word, in the writings of Euripides, Philodemus and Phrynichus, also has an erotic background. Chrysostom in his commentary on 1 Timothy gives the meaning to be “sexual licence”. Paul could then also be saying that he does not allow women or wives to teach their husbands obscenity and fornication. This meaning of the word would then also fit into the background of the immoral, female-based fertility cults which were so common in Greece in those days and in which many women were involved before they were converted to Christianity.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 “...women should remain silent in the churches...”

1 Corinthians 11:5 “And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head...”

The unbiased reader will immediately notice the seemingly contradiction between these two scriptures. In the first one Paul commands women to be silent, whilst his second statement makes it clear that women were used to praying and speaking in public. New Testament prophesying includes speaking words of strengthening, encouragement and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3). The Amplified Bible consistently explains that prophesying also includes inspired preaching and teaching. Because the Bible cannot contradict itself the serious Bible scholar will realize that there must be some logical explanation for this apparent contradiction. And there is.

Paul’s command in 1 Corinthians 14:34, “Let your women keep silence in the churches” must be taken in conjunction with what follows: “for it is not permitted unto them to *speak*.” The word “speak” is the Greek word *lalein* which means to utter sounds that are incoherent and which are not understood by others. Paul uses the same word in 1 Corinthians 14:28 when he instructs a man to be silent when he speaks in an unknown tongue without an interpreter (*laleo* – “to talk at random, as contrasted with *lego* which

involves the intellectual part of man” (Word Study Dictionary). A logical explanation is that Paul is discouraging undisciplined speaking in tongues or babbling in meetings. The context is not men versus women, but order versus confusion. The principle of the context is that a wife is to be submissive to her own husband who is to see to it that she does not bring disorder into the meeting by disorderly speaking, whether in tongues or by babbling.

“They are not allowed to speak...as the Law says” (1 Corinthians 14:34).

Which law is being referred to? Not one single verse from the Old Testament can be quoted where this is commanded! This rule must therefore refer to some law outside of Scripture. The only other law was the Oral law of the Jews in which these exact same words can be found. The same command is found in the Talmud which states that it was a shame for a woman to let her voice be heard among men. Paul clearly taught that Christians were “dead” to these religious laws (Romans 7:4). What must be considered is that in the original Greek text there is no punctuation to indicate when a sentence is a question, a statement or a quotation. Some scholars are of the opinion that this reference to women not being allowed to speak is a quotation from the Oral law which appeared in a previous letter that the Corinthians had written to Paul in which they asked questions, amongst other things whether a woman, like stated in the Jewish Oral law, may speak in a meeting (1 Corinthians 7:1). In chapters 12,13 and 14 in which the proper functioning of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which includes prophesying, is discussed, nobody is instructed to keep quiet. Everybody is encouraged to participate because spiritual gifts are given for the benefit of all (1 Corinthians 12:7).

What Paul also might be doing is to make use of a reference to the Jewish Oral Law to discourage disorderly talking in meetings.

**“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head”
“and every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head”** (1 Corinthians 11:2-16).

The purpose of this passage could be to stop the practice among Jewish Christian men from wearing a “tallith” or head covering during worship. The word used for “man” in this passage is *aner* – the adult male or husband. The Oral law of the Jews required that the married man should wear the tallith which was a sign of guilt and condemnation. For a Christian man to wear it would dishonour his Head, Jesus Christ, who died to make atonement for sin and therefore for him there was no longer any condemnation (Romans 8:1).

What must also be considered is the fact that Christians living in Greece customarily complied with Greek traditions and customs: women were used to covering their heads, whilst men did not. This was contrary to Jewish custom. The Corinthians needed guidance in terms of what to do under their own particular circumstances. It seems that Paul’s attitude was: if customs are not contrary to God’s Word, or to the order in creation, do not change them. The Greek men, for instance, did not cover their heads, symbolising their independence, whilst slaves had to do so. Greek women veiled themselves to symbolise the protection they enjoyed from the males. This was not contrary to God’s order of the husband or father being the head of the family. Since the Greek custom demonstrated God’s order, why should the women change it?

7.

Christian women were advised to dress modestly in a society full of prostitutes who were recognised by the way they dressed: their faces were heavily made up. Usually they also had very short hair and wore no veils. They usually wore brightly coloured tunics instead of the traditional long garments of that time. Paul's concern was that Christian women should never allow themselves, either by the way they dressed or looked, to be viewed as women of low moral standards. In the light of all this, the only way in which a converted prostitute could enter a Christian assembly without making heads turn, was to veil herself for the time it took for her hair to grow.

It seems that Paul's advice to Christians is always in accordance with the situation in which they find themselves in a specific society. This obviously applies to non-moral issues only (1Corinthians 11:16)

Historical Background

The heathen religions of Paul's time gave a prominent and unhealthy place to women. The cult of the fertility goddess, the *Bona Dea*, was restricted to women only. It drew a lot of attention by its immorality. It was the same with the *Bacchanalia* and the cult of Isis. In Corinth many women operated as temple prostitutes in service of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Delphi, Greece's most famous centre of oracles, was also in Corinth. Although the priestesses were all women, no women were allowed into the inner shrine from where the oracles came. I can imagine that converted women would take advantage of their new-found freedom to participate in Christian meetings to the extent that it became disorderly. It is against this background that one has to evaluate the writings of Paul concerning women in meetings.

Conclusion

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Although God ordained different role functions for men and women in the marriage relationship, in Christ all have the same spiritual status. Jesus' command to go and make disciples and to teach them, is applicable to both men and women (Matt.28:20). Some are of the opinion that women should be silent in only meetings where there are men present. There exists no evidence from New Testament teaching to support this view.

What constituted a New Testament meeting? You had a meeting whenever believers got together and everyone was encouraged to minister in whatever spiritual gift they had to offer (1 Crinthians 14:26).

In many translations of the Bible it seems as if only the "*brethren*" are addressed. The Greek word *adelphos* which is so consistently translated as if the New Testament church consisted of only men, in most cases does not convey the meaning of male and female, but is used in a spiritual sense which refers to "...a fellowship of love equivalent to or bringing with it a community of life...co-heirs of eternal life...members of the same tribe...countrymen...of the same nature..." (Word Study Dictionary). Is the following command, as translated in the KJV, applicable to men only: "*Brethren (adelphos), I write no new command unto you...He that...hateth his brother (adelphos)...He that loveth his brother...*(1 John 2:7-11 KJV). Surely no-one would teach that this command is only applicable to men!

8.

Women were not treated with much respect in either Hebrew or Greek-Roman culture. In the time of Jesus women had no place in public life and they were so heavily veiled that a person would have found it difficult to recognize his own mother! It was only through the teachings and attitude of Jesus that women in the early church attained their rightful status of womanhood.

The prophetic promise still stands: *“I will pour my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy...Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit...”* (Acts 2:17-18).

The church that silences women stands in danger of silencing the voice of the Holy Spirit. What an alarming thought!

“How solemn then, the fact that for centuries Christian women have been robbed of their true status...because translators and many expositors, have failed to perceive the true setting of the Apostle’s words” (Jesse Penn-Lewis).

Nick Maartens
P.O.Box 38957
Langenhovenpark
9330
Tel.0827826074