

Women Speaking in Church

by Terry Moore

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All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

The gospel records of Jesus' life indicate that He selected only men to openly preach the gospel to the Church and the public. The book of Acts shows that those men that Christ ordained continued to select only men as elders and pastors. A woman's role in the Church is important and of great value, but nothing indicates that women may assume the responsibilities of an elder, pastor, bishop, evangelist, or apostle.

The elders in the Eternal Church of God have been asked to clarify the Apostle Paul's instruction to women regarding the role they are to have in the Church:

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).

The Apostle's reference to the law was in regards the structure of family when God created the first man and woman. God first said, "*It is* not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him" (Gen. 2:18). This meant that a woman was to support her husband's role as head of the family. Further instructions were given after Eve had chosen to disobey God and lean to her own thoughts regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "Your desire *shall be* for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16).

There are many ways in which these basic guidelines apply to all women whether they are married or not. One of those ways is positions of authority in the Church. This is clearly evident when God declared that only Aaron and his sons would minister to the holy things as priests (Exo. 28:1). These guidelines are what caused the Apostle Paul to write:

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 (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

None of these verses imply that women are substandard to men, or that a woman's only purpose is to bear children, prepare meals, and serve her husband. In fact, when we consider Christ's description of greatness, hierarchy shows us that those who have positions of authority are servants to the people that they govern (Luke 22:26). Men and women reflect the hierarchical relationship of family where the husband and wife work together as a team, but the man will always make the final decision regarding matters of moral principle. This relationship was predetermined, and it was designed to reflect the relationship between Christ and His future bride—the Church. As the apostle also wrote:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. **This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.** Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (Ephesians 5:32-33).

A little background information can help us to understand why God inspired Paul to make these statements. The apostle wrote many letters of encouragement, instruction, and correction during the early years of establishing the New Testament Church of God. At that time, many gathered in homes and some of those homes were owned by women who were active in serving brethren in a variety of ways. Clearly this principle applies to women whose husband was the head of household, but it also applies to single women, those divorced, and widows.

It must first be understood that the admonition does not imply that women are of less value than men. For example, Paul paraphrased an older book of the Bible and was inspired to write of God, "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (2Cor. 6:18). Philip was the father of four unmarried daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8-9). Paul's message is also clear to the Galatians in which he explained, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

The Church of God has never been without significant female contribution to support the work. Many women have served in a similar position as a deacon, but with somewhat different tasks and responsibilities as men. The following verses clearly demonstrate this when Paul wrote:

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise *greet* the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ. Greet Mary, who labored much for us (Romans 16:1-6).

Paul commends the work of both men and women who served in the Church of God. He called Phoebe as "servant" which translated from the Greek *diakonos*; a term from which we get the words deacon, deacons, and deaconess.

Another point that should be considered is that the Church experienced many conflicts both externally and internally at that time. The book of Acts shows that instruction and discussion in the synagogues would frequently turn into disputes. Notice the following:

Then Paul, after the governor had nodded to him to speak, answered: “Inasmuch as I know that you have been for many years a judge of this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself, because you may ascertain that it is no more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship. And they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city” (Acts 24:10-12).

As this verse portrays, the tendency for argument found its way into the Church. As Paul’s letter to the Corinthian brethren also reveals:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s *household*, that there are contentions among you (1 Corinthians 1:10-11).

In the context of internal disputes, Paul did not want women who served in Church of God, such as those who opened their homes for gatherings, to get involved with disputes among the men who were designed to be a type of priest to their household (1Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18). In all of the aforementioned verses, Paul reminded us that God is orderly and delegates authority so that all things will be done in an arranged manner. Therefore, we find the apostle stating, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1Cor. 14:40). This orderly way is where we learn to submit to a higher authority. It is of supreme importance to learn our place within the body of Christ—the Church. As Paul also wrote

For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ... (Romans 12:4-5).

For any stable organization there must be levels of authority. God’s hierarchical government exists right now in heaven, it will be implemented on the earth when Christ returns, and will continue for eternity!

Within this framework, the man is to be the head of the household. This is not to separate men from women, but rather to unite them as a family where each person has a role and responsibilities. When the wife looks to her husband for leadership, he feels respected, and in turn, his desire must be to show love and respect toward his wife. Additionally, the children learn to respect their parents as they learn from this godly relationship.

For this reason, there is order by God’s design for the family. Wives are not to lead Church congregations in instruction, nor were they to interrupt or openly contradict those who were speaking. This includes prayer that is given before, during or after Church gatherings. This does not mean that women are never to teach anyone. Certainly, they are to instruct their children and can even join in discussion among brethren before or after Church services. Subsequently, Paul said that mature women should advise and teach the younger women their place in the family:

The older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, 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 (Titus 2:3-5).

In some cases, a woman's husband may not be an active member of the Church of God. This could mean that the woman will need to ask questions of elders in the Church. We believe that this is appropriate as long as it does not take place during the delivery of a sermon, sermonette, or a Bible reading. A woman seeking advice, counsel, an answer to a biblical question, or even offering another opinion, is not within the context of Paul's instructions for women to remain silent in the Church.

In the Eternal Church of God, we follow the Biblical examples that only men are ordained as elders to serve priestly positions. Only men lead the formal portion of Sabbath and holy day services, including song leading, Bible readings, sermons, and sermonettes. And yet we recognize the fact that God gave women have an important role to play in the family and the Church. They have much to contribute including additional perspectives of topics and situations. We do not believe that it was God's intent for women to never utter a word when brethren congregate.

For this reason, after the formal portion of services have concluded, our fellowship is followed by an informal discussion where questions may be asked, and comments can be made, by anyone. Others who join our service remotely can also participate in this discussion that is aired on a private conferencing number. The discussion is moderated by the song leader who calls on people in an orderly manner.