

Women's Silence in the Church

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"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 Cor. 14:34-35).

In churches today, this seems to be an extremely controversial subject. This scripture is often explained as applying only to the Corinthian church. We are told that the women in Corinth were noisy, shouting across the aisle to their husbands and making a commotion. Thus, Paul was seeking to bring order to that assembly, but his instruction does not really apply to us today.

However, we have another instruction from Paul in his letter to Timothy: *"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 Tim. 2:11-15).*

When facing subjects like this, I think one of our mistakes is to focus on a specific verse that says either something we like or something we don't like, without going back to the foundation to try to understand God's mind in it. We end up arguing about something that seems unreasonable to us, trying to resolve the question with logic, history, or arguments from the scriptures and other resources. This can lead us into confusion or even serious error, and we may miss God's pathway for us, along with its corresponding blessings. So in considering this question, I would like to begin in Genesis for a foundation.

God's Design in Creation

"And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.' Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: 'This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:18-25).

Here we have the origin of the man-woman relationship as designed by God. We were told earlier that God created Adam from the dust of the earth, and now He creates woman out of man. God takes something out of Adam when He creates Eve, then He brings Eve back to Adam and defines the relationship between them. Eve was created as a "helper comparable to him" and God said that "they shall become one flesh." In my words, what God removed physically from Adam when He created Eve

is brought back to Adam in relationship. In this foundational truth we see not only the essential mystery of marriage (see Eph. 5:32), but God's design for how a husband and wife should relate to one another. God created them to function perfectly together as "one flesh." Although the specific statement here is about husbands and wives, I believe the same principle applies generally to how God wants men and women to relate to each other. This needs more expansion, which we will seek to do later. I believe we experience the fullness of God's blessings only as we understand and live in God's plan.

When Paul instructs husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-33, he bases it on the Genesis account. He then expands this to apply to the relationship of Christ with the church. Quoting just a part of this: *"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"* (Eph. 5:30-32). Notice the central idea of "oneness." The husband and wife become "one flesh," as Christ and the church also become "one flesh." Paul says that as members of the body of Christ, we are "of His flesh and of His bones." We will come back to this later, but seeing the husband and wife as "one" in God's eyes is really the foundational truth that should control everything else. We see "two" (physically) but God sees "one." Accepting God's design and our place in that design brings the fullness of God's purpose and grace into a marriage.

Again, the husband/wife relationship parallels and demonstrates the relationship between Christ and His church (His body). I believe if we can begin to comprehend God's thought in all of this, it will form the basis for answering many other questions. Did God have in mind the final marriage of Christ to His bride (Rev. 21:2) when He created Adam and Eve? I believe He did. God is moving with purpose through the ages, and He will not fail to achieve His goal. He will have a bride for His Son. My point is that God is not affected by culture, or by the ideas and the reasoning of man. His plan for reaching His purpose is fixed, and does not change with time or culture.

What does change is people and their concepts, when they allow the world (which is under the sway of the wicked one) to influence their vision and direct their ways. The church is to be the "pillar and ground of the truth," as it is under the authority of Christ. But when we allow ourselves to be pushed into conformity with the world, we are no longer the "salt and light" that God intends us to be. The enemy is behind this. Satan's ultimate purpose is to rob Christ of His inheritance, and he stops at nothing to achieve it. He struck at God's order in Genesis when he moved past Adam and deceived Eve, and his tactics have never changed. He is out to destroy both the natural family and the family of God. A prime tactic of his is to overturn God's design in the family. If he can do that, he can destroy churches and the individual lives that make up the family of God.

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The Flow of Authority in Creation

When considering the relationship between men and women, both in the family and in the church, I believe the central issues revolve around authority. Conflicts are very often conflicts of authority. The origin can be traced to Satan himself when he said, "I will no longer be under the authority of God. Instead I will rise up and be like the Most High" (see Isaiah 14:12-15). From then until now, Satan has been at war with God, seeking to turn all he can against God and His authority in their lives.

Paul expresses God's flow of authority as follows: *"But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God"* (1 Cor. 11:3). Paul goes on to make application of this truth about men and women, but for now I want to focus on that one statement. First, notice that it does not relate to who is more important. Paul says, "God is the head of Christ." We do not think less of Christ because He took His appointed place under God. All through His earthly ministry, Jesus submitted Himself to His Father. He said He did not do His own will, but submitted Himself to do the will of His Father. We do not think Christ to be inferior because He did that, but rather we think more highly of Him! (See Philippians 2:5-11.)

When Paul says that man is the head of woman, it is in the same light. Woman is not of less importance or worth; this is simply a statement of God's creation design for man and woman, and He has fitted both perfectly for this relationship. All He asks is that men and women accept their God-given roles, then function in their roles by faith. God's promise is to bless them if they will. And just as Christ was lifted up and given a name above every other name, woman will also be lifted up and partake of the blessings and glory of God as she accepts her place in God's plan.

Satan came to Christ to tempt Him to exalt Himself in miraculous ways (see Luke 4:1-13). But Christ refused the offer of the enemy and chose to go God's way, which was Calvary (Phil. 2:5-11). It was not an easy way, but it was God's chosen will for Him. Likewise, the enemy came to Eve to draw her away from what God had commanded. She believed the lie of Satan and was deceived. She then became the instrument of Satan to pull Adam down with her. Paul says that Eve was deceived, but Adam was not. He knew what he was doing; thus, God held him accountable for leading the whole human race into sin.

Spiritual Authority

When we begin to speak about authority, we may have a very different view from God's. Jesus must be our example, and He exercised His authority as a servant. *"So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them'"* (John 13:12-17).

Natural authority (that which originates in man) is often dictatorial and self-serving. Spiritual authority does not consider self but the good of the other. The flow of God's authority is the grace of God to serve and lift up. *"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..."* (Eph. 5:25-26) A husband who is moving in the love and grace of God considers his wife as one with himself, and thus treats her as he would his own body. When this vision begins to control us, I think we will be on our way to understanding God's mind in the husband/wife relationship.

Looking at the question of authority from the wife's viewpoint, we have this instruction: *"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"* (Eph. 5:22-24). Again notice that Christ is the example. The spiritual truth demonstrated by Christ and His church is to be applied in the family. To do this, the wife must be moving in faith before God. If she is submitting "as unto the Lord," then spiritual grace and wisdom will be hers. The foundation of her submission is Christ as her Lord, and with this confidence she expresses that submission in her relationship with her husband. However, if only her husband is in view, her submission will likely be on a natural level, where personality, self-interest, and natural ability dominate rather than the grace of God and the vision of Christ and His church.

If a husband is laying down his life as Christ did, and his wife is submitting with God in view, then God's love will be governing and He will be glorified. But what if the husband is not moving in the love of God or the wife is not submitting as God designed? The challenges are real, but there is still a way. Each one (either husband or wife) can still move in their God-appointed place, believing in Him to make the difference. The love of God was victorious over the enemy at Calvary. Godly submission is powerful (see 1 Peter 3:1-6). No matter how difficult the situation seems, remember that God's grace is far beyond human power and comprehension. God is not limited by human reasoning and resources, nor does He change His design to fit personality or circumstances. His plan is fixed, and He will bless those who move within His order in faith before Him.

While many would agree on God's design for man and woman in the natural family, some have trouble applying that same truth to the family of God. Sometimes the justification for this is that the words for "woman" and "wife" are the same word in the New Testament and must be translated based on context. Thus, some see the instruction in 1 Corinthians 11 as applying only to the husband/wife relationship. But if we step back and look at the overall working of God, I believe we will see consistency from Genesis to Revelation, and harmony between the natural family and the spiritual family. Let us look at things from a higher point of view, and I think objections will disappear and we will see how God's design applies in both.

Seeing the Church as the Body (or Bride) of Christ

When we begin to apply the truth we are considering to men and women in general, especially in the church (not just to husbands and wives), problems are often a result of our concept of the church. Many people think of the church as an organization or a program (a meeting). We "go to church" or to a "service." When we use those terms, it reveals that we do not see the church as the body of Christ or the bride of Christ. Instead of seeing ourselves as "members," we see ourselves as either spectators or participants in a program. For example, in some settings women are prominent in leading the praise time, in ways such as singing. Women can certainly sing and lead singing, and we reason that it is proper for women to be involved in that way since they are not "teaching" or exercising authority over men.

But the church is not primarily a meeting. It is not an organization, but rather an organism that is alive with the life of God. One area we need to rethink is this: what does it mean to come before God as a body, as the church? It is one thing to meet in a home for informal fellowship, to have a Bible study or a time of prayer. But when the whole church comes together before God as one body, is there not a different focus? I believe that is the context Paul had in mind when he said, "Let the women keep silent." When reading 1 Corinthians 11-14, take notice of the phrases "when you come together" and "when the whole church comes together," such as in 14:26, shortly before the verse we are considering.

The church comes together not primarily to meet with each other, but to meet with God. The whole emphasis of scripture is that God has ordained men to give the leadership in the church. When men pray in the church, they are giving voice for the whole body as they address God. And when men speak to the church, they are commanded to speak as an oracle of God (1 Peter 4:1). The scripture clearly teaches that God has called men to function in leadership under the authority of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

I believe the real need is for a spiritual vision of what God is doing and how He is working in the church (see Ephesians chapters 1-3, especially 1:22-23, and 2:19-22). This takes a miracle of revelation from God (Eph. 1:15-21). The church is not a natural working. It is a spiritual working, empowered by the Holy Spirit working in and through men and women, preparing us as the bride of Christ to be married to Him for all eternity. When we are before God, being led by the Holy Spirit, we will not need a "worship team." The Holy Spirit indwelling us will bring forth worship that will bless the heart of God. Will the sisters be part of that worship? Absolutely, but they will not be leading it. They will be at rest in their God-given place, rejoicing as the brothers take their place of responsibility in leadership as the Holy Spirit inspires and directs. The Holy Spirit will bring forth worship that exalts Jesus Christ as Lord, worship that pleases God.

So why does this seem so hard? Why is there so much contention over this? I think a root cause can be found in Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians chapters 1 and 2. I encourage us to consider all of that section carefully before God, but I will only quote these verses: "...that no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Cor. 1:29). "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

Applying the truth in this section of scripture to our topic, God does not accept any expression of man, or "flesh," as we are gathered unto Him. He only accepts what is of Christ. Paul's testimony was, "I am crucified with Christ" (see Gal. 2:20). God has rejected anything that is according to our inheritance from Adam. Our place is to agree with God's verdict and walk by faith in the life of God. This is not

easily done, because there is something in us naturally that wants to rise up and be heard, to express self. For all of us to have the same testimony as Paul (I am dead) takes a real dealing with God. I encourage all of us not to pass this by too quickly, for in this truth is the answer to many of our problems.

Why might sisters feel they must speak when the church is gathered in the presence of God? They may believe they have received something from God to share, or that the men are falling short. It can be difficult to remain quiet and trust God to bring truth through the brothers. They may feel that they are also spiritual and they hear God just as the brothers do, but find themselves competing with the men. They may be completely sincere and have no wrong motives at all. But God has designed that women show their spirituality in this way: *"Do not let your adornment be merely outward--arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel--rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God"* (1 Peter 3:3-4). God is not pleased with competition, but rather when both men and women take their God-given places. This is very pleasing to God.

But what if the brothers do not take their place? Might they also be unspiritual? Absolutely. But when the women try to make up for the lacks of the men, the response is often this: "Okay, let them do it. Anyway, I feel inadequate, and they are doing a good job, so I will just be quiet." The quieter they are, the more the sisters get frustrated and do more. And the end of it all is a gathering that is contrary to what God desires. There may be a lot of activity, but God is not just looking for activity. He wants a bride prepared for her husband. He is looking for submission to His authority and will. The application of the cross means that there is no expression of natural man or the will of man (and woman), but only an expression of the life and will of God.

It may seem that I am against the sisters. I am not, and neither is God. I am saying that the glory of God is only seen when both men and women take their God-given places in faith. When they do, submitting to the authority of the head (Christ), led by the Holy Spirit (who is preparing the bride to be married to Christ Jesus for eternity), then God will be glorified. That does not come all at once. The flesh (what we are according to Adam) does not die easily. But can we see beyond the natural into the eternal purpose of God, and can we see how God wants that purpose to be worked out now? Again, this takes spiritual revelation that only God can give, but He will give it to those who are willing to pay the price (see Revelation 3:18-19).

Do the sisters have any place to speak? Absolutely. As the Holy Spirit leads, they have a very important place in the working of God--no less important than the brothers. But in exercising their grace, they do not move in a place of public leadership or authority over men. If they are sensitive to the Holy Spirit, He will show them how to do this. They have a very great place in the home. They also have a great responsibility in the witness to the world. And they have a very great place in the church, the body of Christ. As they take their place in the natural family and the spiritual family, the Holy Spirit will lead them to minister in a quiet way to encourage their husbands and brothers to take their places and move in the grace God has given them. They have a powerful ministry. Women have power, and they are responsible before God for how they use that power. It can be used to build up or tear down. They are not second-class citizens of the kingdom of God. But again, God wants them to move within His order for His purpose and glory.

Have there been times that women were used by God in a public way, with men present, and it yielded good results? My answer is yes. God does not always wait until everything is perfect before He acts. He meets each person where they are, and satisfies the hungry heart. Some women are very capable of speaking publicly and giving leadership. But just because they are capable and may have functioned in that way does not justify their continuing when they begin to see God's purpose in His design. That can be a very dangerous place. According to Paul, Eve was deceived, and women need to be very aware of this danger. God designed women to follow, which might cause them to be more easily led into error. Staying in a place of submission is their place of safety. God will bless them and use them mightily in that place.

Has God Called Women to a Place of Public Ministry?

I think this question is most often asked in the context of the ministry graces mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 (apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors, and evangelists). In many circles today, it is common for women to function in these callings. Without looking at all the scriptures used to justify this practice, I wish to point out one principle. Are these not all functions of leadership and authority, including authority over men? Paul gives the basic qualifications for these men in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 (I believe the qualifications for "deacons" are the qualifications for ministers). As revealed in the Genesis account, God created Eve to be a helper, but never to take the same role as Adam.

A statement often made is this: "If we eliminate women from the ministry (or function of the church), we eliminate half of the church." While on first thought this may seem logical, I do not believe it is a true statement at all. God does not eliminate women from ministry. He has just given them a role that is different from men, and when sisters give themselves to the ministry God has called them to, it is glorious and effective for the purpose of God.

There are many passages of scripture that describe the ministry God has given to women. It is not our purpose here to expand on all of those. But in simple terms, it is a ministry of "helps" that support the ministries given to men, and they need that help very much. God has given sisters a very important ministry, and without it, the overall ministry is greatly affected.

Paul describes ministry in the church in terms of a physical body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you." No member can tell another member they have no need of them. God has so designed the body that even the smallest member we may think is not important is very important. But God chooses the grace and function of each member, and it is the responsibility of each member to be submitted to the head (Christ) and function where God places them. God is concerned about the whole body functioning together. I, by myself, am not the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ together, so God's focus is "together." Because that is God's design, we dare not try to function in another way. The natural tendency of man is to move independently, but that is not God's way. Let us all accept His design and move in faith together.

What about the gifts of the Spirit? Are the sisters expected to move in all the gifts of the Spirit, along with the brothers? My answer is yes, but again within the order of God. The gifts of the Spirit are open to all, according to the choice and direction of the Holy Spirit. But God will not violate His will or ultimate purpose as the church gathers and functions in the exercise of those gifts. A woman may sense God speaking to her in the time of gathering, but that does not mean she must speak out that word publicly at that time (see 1 Corinthians 14:32). The gifts of the Spirit are available to all members, every day, in every situation, as the Holy Spirit wills. A woman will want to please God in her exercise

of the gifts so as not to usurp authority, but rather move quietly to minister grace as God directs.

Some Additional Encouragement

To have rest in our hearts concerning God's structure of authority, I believe it is very important that the sisters are included in such a way that full benefit is made of their grace. Fellowship is key to this. For husband and wife, this fellowship should be experienced daily in the home. A husband should lead in this fellowship, as he thinks and talks with his wife about the purpose of God and how it works out in the daily affairs of their life. If this is done properly, when a husband stands to speak in the assembly, his wife will know that her input has been included, and will take joy in seeing her husband (as her head) express the word of God so that the whole body is edified.

For a single sister who does not have a father in the assembly, this may be more challenging. But I believe there is still a way that she can be a supply according to her grace, receive from others to see her needs met, and still honor God's order. She can seek out fellowship with a brother, together with his wife, where she can have her questions answered and be a supply to the brother of what God is revealing to her. She also might find the word God has given her being expressed through this brother in the assembly in various ways. God will make up what is lacking in natural family relationships in the family of God. (Consider Mark 10:29-31 in this regard.)

One of the main reasons that men and women have often struggled with the plan of God is that truth has not been held in love. Either a "rule" has been established which does not minister grace, or "love" has been defined as letting everyone do what they think is best. It has been said that truth not held in love is no longer truth, and love that does not walk in truth is not love. Both are of God and must be held together. To see the intention of God worked out in a way that brings glory to God takes the Holy Spirit indwelling each member, revelation that only comes from God, and wisdom that is from above (James 3:13-18). All of this means an active relationship with God and spiritual relationships with one another.

Repeating what was said earlier, I believe the real answer to all of this is the cross of Jesus Christ. When we can say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ," and there is no longer any desire to express self, I think our spiritual vision will be much clearer. That applies to all brothers and sisters, no matter what grace God has given them. When that is true in our lives, we will be in strong agreement with Paul in this prayer: *"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen"* (Eph. 3:20-21).