

INVOLVEMENT OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC ASSEMBLIES OF THE CONNECTICUT VALLEY CHURCH OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

Because our practice in the involvement of women in our public assemblies is different than the experience of many who visit us, we felt the need to offer a brief explanation of our reasons for that practice. The topic deserves a more detailed treatment, which we will write later, but at least here you can get an overview of the results of our extensive Biblical study of the matter that has taken place over the course of more than 15 years.

Although for some time many in the congregation suspected from our own personal Bible study and reflection what the ultimate outcome might be, we were determined that any change in our practice be based on the conviction that it is what God wanted based on our understanding of His word. This flows from our rich religious heritage of regarding the Bible as the sole authority in matters of faith and practice. We were determined that the reasons for any possible changes be based on our understanding of Scripture and influenced as little as possible by the sweeping social changes taking place in our world. What follows is a brief explanation of how we arrived at our conclusions.

TIMELINE

1993. Since one of our supporting congregations had requested that we not allow women to pray out loud in mixed company, this topic had been one of interest from early in our history. This interest finally expressed itself in the summer of 1993 when in a congregational meeting we agreed that we needed to study the participation of women in the church, particularly in our assemblies, and committed ourselves to do so. Gary Burke then taught a class on women praying in public based on I Tim. 2:8-10, and in our Sunday morning adult Bible class that summer Steve Holt led us in more comprehensive study of men and women that included a treatment of key New Testament passages and some individual topics, like submission. Other priorities crowded out the follow up that had been planned, and it was some time before we returned to the issue in a formal way.

1999-2000. The matter of women praying would not go away. One Sunday morning during open prayer time, a woman prayed out loud in the assembly. No one said anything about it, but our leaders realized that this was a significant change in our practice and requested that we refrain from doing it again until we could study the matter thoroughly. Soon afterwards Kent Blake and Gary Burke led the Sunday morning adult Bible class in a study of I Corinthians for two or three quarters. We spent extra time on key sections in I Cor. 11 and 14 and later added I Tim. 2. After the study we polled the congregation with the result that everyone but two believed there was no Biblical basis for keeping women from praying in any setting. The other two were uncomfortable with the change but did not oppose our making it. We decided

that for the present we would limit women's praying in the assembly to spontaneous prayer in open prayer time and later revisit the matter to determine if women should be added to the regular prayer rotation. To our discredit, we failed to follow through on either. For the next several years we rarely had open prayer time, which had the unintended effect of denying women the opportunity to pray in the assembly. We also did not revisit the issue.

2001-2007. During this period, further Bible study was taking place in various venues, but not as a part of our adult Bible class offerings. One was a group of women who on their own read through the entire NT together to determine what it taught about women. To their astonishment, they found that what they had always believed the NT taught about women was far from what was actually the case. During the same period our newly appointed elders concluded that the time had come to settle the matter once and for all. They set aside large blocks of time in elders' meetings for Bible study on the issue, noting where they had reached consensus and where either they or the congregation needed further study.

2008-2009. In the fall through the spring quarters Gary Burke taught a comprehensive Bible study on the matter as a Sunday morning adult Bible class. For the most part, those in the class reached the same consensus the elders had arrived at earlier. The time had come to go to the entire congregation.

2010. Separating the issues of what the Bible permits us to do from what we should do and when we should do them, the elders wrote the following statement about the unanimous conclusion they had reached:

For some time the elders have been studying this issue of women's roles. Through the course of our study we have come to a unified agreement that as far as God is concerned there is no distinction between what a man or a woman may do in any gathering of the Connecticut Valley Church of Christ. This includes:

- *Scripture reading*
- *Prayer*
- *Communion thought*
- *Worship coordinator*
- *Song leader*
- *Teach of adult Bible classes*
- *Preaching*

We then met individually with every member of the congregation, shared the statement, obtained their areas of agreement and disagreement, and asked for their thoughts on how we should proceed and how that would affect them. There were a few members who were not comfortable either with the direction or individual points of our conclusion, but none of them indicated that implementation would cause them to leave the congregation. By far the majority believed that we were on solid Biblical

ground. Later that year we began phasing in the changes gradually, all the while continuing to gauge the congregation's support as we moved forward.

2011 to Present. As we have implemented the changes, we have found that there are still a few in the congregation who have questions about women preaching, so for the present we have stopped short of that change. Some who were not in the original study in 2008-2009 and a few others who were in the study requested another class to go over our conclusions and the Biblical reasons for them. We finished that study in April 2013. All who were in the class agreed that the course we are following rests on a solid Biblical foundation.

What follows is a summary of conclusions we reached in our six-month congregational study in 2008-2009. It includes some of the evidence and reasoning as well, but there is much more behind our conclusions than is possible to present in a synopsis of this type. The elders are open to discuss more fully the issues raised in this document with interested individuals, and we welcome feedback as we continue to seek God's will in this matter.

OUR CONCLUSIONS

Genesis 1-3. So many studies of this topic begin with Paul or at least focus on key passages in his letters. We believed that the true starting point should be these foundational chapters in Genesis, so we began there. This is especially true because of the allusions to or quotations from these chapters in such NT passages as Rom. 5:12-19, I Cor. 15:21-22, II Cor. 11:3, Gal. 3:28, Eph. 5:31, and I Tim. 2:13-15. Independently members of the class studied the text, focusing their study on any evidence they could find of the following:

- Male superiority, leadership, etc.
- Female inferiority, subordination, etc.
- Equality of the sexes
- That the passage refers to the husband/wife primarily
- That the passage's application goes beyond the husband/wife relationship
- What was the sin in Genesis 3, and what was the culpability of each party?

Then we discussed the chapters together, coming to the following conclusions:

Prior to the Fall

- There is no evidence of inequality of the sexes or hierarchy of any kind (Gen. 1-2).
- The entire focus is on a husband and wife, not on men and women in general.
- Adam and Eve shared joint dominion over the earth (1:26, 28).
- Though no hierarchy in their relationship is in evidence, God did distinguish between Adam and Eve in that, although Eve sinned first, God initially addressed Adam about the sin, not Eve or both of them together (3:9). This point resurfaces

in Paul, who did not consider the “original” sin, i.e., that of Eve, to have negative consequences on everyone thereafter, but that of Adam (the second sin) (Rom. 5:12-19).

After the Fall

- Male leadership after the fall refers only to the family (husband/wife relationship).
- Nothing beyond a husband/wife relationship is stated or implied in the text.
- Both Adam and Eve were culpable for their sin, although some of the consequences were different.
- The fact that Adam was put in a position over Eve as a consequence of the fall is a further indication that hierarchy in their relationship did not exist before the fall.

Jesus

We could well have begun with Jesus and in fact felt it important to do so before turning to Paul. The impact of Jesus’ attitude toward and treatment of women has received too little attention, and were he usually the starting point, rather than Paul, the history of men and women in the church might have been written very differently. In order to more fully appreciate Jesus’ revolutionary stance on women, we need to examine the world into which he was born.

Women in First Century Judaism

We are fortunate to have in the Mishnah an excellent window to view first-century Palestinian Rabbinic (Pharisaic) Judaism. These saying of rabbis from the first century BC through the second century AD reflect the opinions of Palestinian Jewish scholars on the interpretation of the Law of Moses. No other source gives us in one place better insight into the world of the Pharisees with whom Jesus sparred on numerous occasions. The same can also be said for Paul’s background, because he was trained to be a rabbi under one of the most renowned rabbis of the day, Rabban Gamaliel I (Acts 22:3). Here are some of those representative opinions, including a few non-legal statements by Josephus and Philo, first century AD Jews.

Social Status. In the Mishnah, women were commonly grouped with slaves and children (e.g., *Berakhoth* 3.3, *Rosh ha-Shanah* 1.8, *Sukkah* 2.8, and *Baba Metzia* 1.5).

Submission. A woman was under the control of her father until she reached majority (age 12 ½) or became married, at which time she came under her husband’s control (*Nedarim* 10.1-5).

Property. If a married woman acquired property, it belonged to her husband. In this case she was in the same position as a minor son or daughter or a foreign slave but in a lower position than a son or daughter of age or a Hebrew slave (*Baba Mitzia* 1.5).

When a man married a wife, he was seen as getting possession of her (*Ketuboth* 8.1).

Marriage. Men were to be honorable in acquiring a wife from one who was authorized to give her away. Because according to the Law woman was inferior to man in every respect, she was to be submissive that she might be directed by the man, to whom God had given all authority. However, this submission should not be used to humiliate her (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.200-201).

For rabbis, talking with women, even their own wives, was seen as a negative diversion to the study of the Law, a diversion that could ultimately lead them to Hell (*Aboth* 1.5).

Divorce. Women were not allowed to divorce their husbands, but in certain extreme cases they could insist that their husbands divorce them (*Ketuboth* 7.10).

While the School of Rabbi Shammai took the phrase, “some indecency,” in Deut. 24:1 to allow a man to put away his wife only for sexual impropriety, the School of Rabbi Hillel broadened the pretexts for divorce to almost anything, including spoiling a dish (*Gittin* 9.10), the wife’s barrenness (*Gittin* 4.8, *Yebamoth* 6.6), the wife’s becoming a deaf-mute (*Yebamoth* 14.1) or if he finds someone else more beautiful (*Gittin* 9.10).

Teaching Children. A woman was not allowed to teach children, nor was an unmarried man (*Kiddushin* 3.13).

Social Contact outside the Home. A man could not remain alone with two women (unless his wife was present), but a woman could remain alone with two men (*Kiddushin* 4.12).

A woman violated custom if she went out with her hair not put up, spun in the street, or spoke with a man (*Ketuboth* 7.6).

According to Philo (*The Special Laws* III.31 [169-171]), in first century Alexandria, public life was for men only. Women were not to leave the home, over which they were the manager in charge. When they had to leave the home, as to go to worship, they should do so when most people were not out and about.

Jesus and Women

Against this backdrop, Jesus’ interaction with women is nothing short of astounding and signals a radically new era in male/female relationships. In spite of the fact that Jesus was concerned with limiting opportunities for his enemies to discredit his

mission (see, for example, Matt. 17:27, Mark 1:44), observing social conventions about women does not appear to be one of those areas of concern. Far from it. This appears to be one of those places where he wanted to make a statement.

- He interacted with women in public, even one on one (John 4).
- Women disciples were a part of his traveling entourage (Luke 8:1-3, Mark 15:40-41, Luke 23:55).
- He allowed them to sit at his feet as a disciple would at the feet of his rabbi (Luke 10:39, see Acts 22:3), and he discussed theological issues with them (John 4).
- He taught that women and men were on an equal footing in dissolving a marriage relationship (Mark 10:11-12).
- He allowed women to touch him (John 12:3, Luke 7:38-39), and he touched them (Luke 13:13, Matt. 8:14).
- He took the most conservative stance on limiting men's ability to abandon their wives (Matt. 5:32, 19:9).
- On more than one occasion Jesus defended a woman when others were demeaning her (Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, John 12:4-8).
- The first recorded revelation to someone that he was the Messiah was to a woman (John 4:26).

While Jesus did not teach directly about the role or status or dignity of women, his comfort level with them and they with him in both public and private is remarkable, given the social context. Clearly, something new was going on with him, and we see this played out in the church in the first few decades after his departure.

Paul

We studied five passages in Paul. Three of them (I Cor. 11:3-16, 14:34-36, and I Tim. 2:8-15) are where modern discussions of the role of women in Christian assemblies usually begin. Before examining them, however, we started with the household code in Eph. 5:21-6:9 and Gal. 3:28, because conclusions drawn about them could have an impact on an understanding of the other three.

Ephesians 5:21-6:9.

Literary, Social, and Biblical Context. This passage is a household code, a common literary type used in Greco-Roman literature at the time. These codes cover various relationships in Roman households—husband-wife, father-children, and master-slave. In the NT two other household codes are found in Col. 3:18-4:1 and I Pet. 2:18-3:7. While these three relationships are found in Roman homes, they go back ultimately to Aristotle's *Politics*. Here he taught that the man was to be the ruler and the role of those in each of the subordinate relationships is *obedience*. When we compare the code in Ephesians with those in Colossians and I Peter, the most striking difference is the amount of space dedicated to the husband's role. Here, then, is where we need to look for Paul's major point.

General Observations

- Verse 21, calling for mutual submission on the part of all parties, even the stronger, appears to be the introductory statement for the whole household code. This idea was almost unheard of in non-Christian household codes of the time.
- Although the weaker parties (children and slaves) are to *obey* the stronger (father and master), this is not the case of wives toward their husbands, a major divergence from the social norm.
- From the standpoint of the three weaker parties (wives, children, and slaves), there is nothing new in the behavior that is called for. What is new is the motivation for it. In the case of the more powerful parties (husbands, fathers, and masters), both the behavior and motivation are new. Jesus has changed everything.

Wives (5:22-24, 33b). Wives are instructed to submit to their own husbands in everything, something which would not have sounded out of place in any cultural setting where the NT church found itself. It should be noted, though, that submission is a voluntary act. Nothing in these verses or the following ones addressed to husbands gives husbands the right to enforce or monitor their wives' compliance. If the husband carries out his responsibility as laid out in those verses, he will have his hands full enough.

Husbands (5:25-32, 33a). What Paul asks of husbands is revolutionary against any first century backdrop—Jewish, Roman or Greek. Rather than treat a wife as a personal possession or as one who is to be ruled or commanded, Paul says she is to be loved, and he is very explicit about what that looks like. Love for one's wife is to go as far as to give one's life for her (5:25), to be as intense as for one's own body or self (5:28, 33), and to be serving (nourish and cherish—5:29)—all based on the way Jesus expressed his love for the church.

Although Paul in his instructions to wives and husbands does not reverse the effects of Gen. 3:16 (see 5:22-24), he culminates his point about the way Christ loved his church and husbands are to love their wives by quoting and interpreting Gen. 2:24. This kind of love leaves no room for abuse or divorce or selfishness. This is the way a husband lives out the words, "be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ" (5:21).

Galatians 3:28

General Observation. For many, this verse is the single most important passage in the NT dealing with the position of women. To them it expresses Paul's social agenda to eliminate all male-female distinctions in the church and home. In our study we concluded that these interpreters have wrested the verse out of its context, interpreted it in proof-text fashion, and revealed more of their own social agenda than Paul's. The verse has no bearing at all on our topic, because in Gal. 3 Paul is developing an entirely different point.

The Passage in Context. In Galatians Paul is trying to counter Judaizing teachers who are attempting to force Jewish practices on new Gentile Christians as requirements of their new faith. Gal. 3 has an extended counter argument centered on Abraham. It culminates in 3:26 with the statement, “for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” Rather than observance of the Jewish law as the vehicle to be in a relationship as a child of God, faith in Christ is the key. It is through baptism that this union with Christ has occurred and the result is clothing oneself with Christ (v. 27) or, put another way, being one with/in Christ (v. 28). Hence, the three-fold groupings in the first part of 3:28 have to do with becoming one with Christ through faith and baptism. Gal. 3:28, then, has no bearing on the topic at hand, and it had no further role in our study.

I Corinthians 11:3-16

Two Disputed Points. This is one of the most notoriously difficult passages to interpret in the entire NT. During our study we found almost as many concrete points of dispute as there are verses. Most of them have no bearing on the role of women in NT congregations, so we concentrated our efforts on two that do.

- *The meaning of the word head, especially in 11:3.* While we recognized that there has been a recent challenge to the usual meaning of the Greek word, *kephale* (*head*), we concluded provisionally that the usual meaning signifying leadership or having authority is probably the correct one.
- *Gender-specific words.* It is difficult to tell whether and when in the passage the male and female gender-specific words, *anēr* and *gynē*, should be translated *man* and *woman* or *husband* and *wife*, especially in 11:3. We concluded that in verse 3, at least, Paul intends the meaning, *husband* and *wife*, for two reasons. First, nowhere else in the entire Bible are men and women in general put in a hierarchical relationship, but husbands and wives are (Gen. 3:16). Secondly, if men in general were over women in general, the implication would be unthinkable in the church, much less in society at large. This would mean that in the church, because I am a man and only because I am a man, your wife would have to be subordinate to me and my wife to you.

The Context. 11:2 begins a long, multi-chapter section that deals with the regular Corinthian assemblies. There is even some discussion of the Lord’s table prior to this in 10:14-22, and the overall section goes through chapter 14. Even the matter of spiritual gifts addressed in chapters 12 and 13 prepare the reader for Paul’s treatment of how they are to be exercised when the church comes together to worship (chapter 14).

What Is Clear. While this passage presents some unique challenges for those who try to understand its meaning, certain points are abundantly clear.

- Paul was concerned about both women and men, not just women, in the matter of head covering (11:4-5).
- Both men and women prayed and prophesied (preached under the influence of the Holy Spirit) in the Corinthian assemblies (11:4-5, 13). The only difference between the two has to do with head covering. The argument that Paul intends women to pray only silently falls apart on two counts. First, prophecy is by nature spoken aloud, and women did it just as men did, so why import the issue of silent versus spoken prayer into the text when Paul did not? Secondly, what men did women did. Paul makes no distinction other than the matter of head covering.
- The conclusion is inescapable. Women prayed and preached (prophesied) aloud in the Corinthian assemblies!

The Big Two. So far nothing in the Genesis account, Jesus' example and teachings, or Paul has suggested that God intended a subordinate role for women to men in the church or its worship. In I Cor. 14:34-35 and I Tim. 2:8-15 we find the only NT limitations on what some women may do in Christian assemblies. Without them there is nothing in the NT that would cause one to suspect that there are any restrictions on what women may do in Christian assemblies. In fact, these two passages move against the flow of NT teaching about the status and role of women in congregational life. Other passages in Paul evidence a much wider role for women in congregational, missionary, and evangelistic activities than has often been recognized, due in large part to the influence of traditional interpretations of these two passages. We will now examine them to try to determine whether their restrictions pertain to all women in every congregational setting for all time or whether they are better understood as reflecting peculiar situations found in Corinth (I Cor. 14) and Ephesus (I Tim. 2).

I Corinthians 14: 34-35

The Context. As was noted earlier, this passage falls within a multi-chapter discussion of the assemblies in Corinth, much of it corrective of certain practices. These two verses address one of the types of disorderly conduct that was occurring in the assemblies (14:40). Limits are to be placed on the number of tongue speakers and prophets who may speak (14:27, 29), and under certain conditions they are to remain silent (*sigāō* - 14:28, 30). The third group whose speaking could also be characterized as disorderly conduct was certain wives, and they also are told to remain silent (*sigāō* - 14:34). The rest of the chapter continues the theme of verbally disruptive activity in the assemblies, so it is clear that 14:34-35 is a part of that overall discussion. To apply these verses more broadly would be to wrest them from their context with no satisfactory explanation of why Paul places them at this point. Further, the rule of "silence" for the tongue speakers and prophets pertained to the point of disruptive use of their gifts, not to their total silence in all situations. Why should it be different for these wives?

Transitional Statement. It is unclear whether the phrase, "As in all the congregations/ assemblies of the saints" (14:33b) goes with what precedes or what follows, as is witnessed by the disagreement among translations. Certainly what

Paul says in 14:34-35 would be applicable everywhere the situation in Corinth is duplicated. However, the evidence slightly favors the traditional verse break, with the phrase concluding the preceding thought, because in all three of the other places in I Cor. where Paul makes a similar statement (4:17, 7:17, and 11:16), the words conclude the previous thought rather than begin the following one. Hence the phrase probably should not be taken as a part of the discussion of these wives.

Who were these women? It is clear that Paul is writing only about married women and only a special group of them, namely, those who have Christian husbands who are capable of answering questions about what went on in the assembly on a given day. Virtually all English translations obscure this fact by translating the gender-specific word, *gynē*, by *women/woman*, rather than *wives/wife*, as the context requires. The reference to wives' submission based on the law (14:34) drives the point home even more forcefully. The only place in "the law" that could be Paul's reference is Gen. 3:16, and, as we have seen, that verse refers to a husband-wife relationship, not to men and women in general. Thus, whether it is based on a cultural or a universal norm, the statement, "it is shameful for a wife to speak in the assembly" (14:35), refers only to an affront to a husband-wife relationship, not a men-women one.

What were these wives doing? Just as in the case of the tongue speakers and prophets (14:26-33), Paul does not say precisely what the disruptive behavior was, but he gives us enough information to draw reasonable inferences. Note that those who heard a prophet's message were to weigh what was said (14:29). A reasonable scenario is that certain wives were destroying the flow of the prophets' communication by continuing to interrupt them with questions as they weighed what the prophets were saying. In fact, the word "speak," which is used twice of the wives in this passage, grammatically refers to repeated speaking, not to the simple act of speaking. Paul is not addressing an occasional question by these wives, but rather their repeatedly speaking up in a way that was disruptive. Some have even suggested that even more than this was involved, and it makes perfect sense in the context. The wives may have been interrupting their own husbands' speaking. So Paul reminds them that in their marriages they are to be submissive and not do anything in public that could be regarded as shameful and that they have a perfect opportunity to gain clarification on what their husbands were saying. They could simply ask them when they got home.

Conclusions. Despite the fact that the traditionally 14:34-35 has been interpreted as applying to all women for all time, we found that on closer examination of these verses in their context

- Paul addresses his comments to a limited group of Christian wives, not to all the Christian women in the congregation.
- As another example of disruptive behavior during the assembly, these wives' offense related to repeatedly speaking up in the Corinthian assemblies in a manner that violated good order (14:40).

- This behavior was doubly inappropriate because it called into question the propriety of the way they conducted themselves publicly in the presence of their husbands.
- Nothing in this passage places any restrictions on women in general in Christian assemblies, and there is not even a hint of subordination of women in general to men in general in the church.

What a tragedy it is that these verses have been used for so long and so inappropriately to silence all Christian women in all Christian assemblies for all time!

I Timothy 2:8-15

Interpretive Difficulties. The interpretive situation with this passage is the exact opposite of that in I Cor. 14:34-35. While the meaning is abundantly clear there, it is anything but clear here. So little is known about the background against which Paul wrote I Tim. 2 that at numerous points two or more interpretations are possible. It is small wonder both that the traditional understanding of this text became so entrenched and that for many it raises more questions than it solves. Cogent arguments can and have been made on both sides of the question—that Paul intends his instructions for universal application or that they are best understood as applying to the particular situation in Ephesus. In reading the literature on this passage, it is almost as though what the interpreter brings to the text is more influential on his conclusions than what he finds in it. The traditional interpretation and the reasons for it are well known, so what follows here is a weighing of the evidence that the passage is addressing the situation in Ephesus in particular, rather than is offering instructions for every setting.

The Setting. Paul was concerned with false teaching in Ephesus, so he asked Timothy to remain there to confront those who taught different doctrines (1:3). These would-be teachers had turned away and were without understanding (1:6-7). Some younger women had already “turned away after Satan” (5:15), and he even encourages younger widows to marry and assume normal wifely domestic roles (5:14). Among the elements of the heresy being promoted was opposition to marriage itself (4:3). Paul hoped to come to Ephesus soon to address these and other matters himself, but the letter was written to Timothy as instructions on how to behave in God’s house, should he be delayed (3:14-15). After the letter’s introductory matters, in chapter 2 Paul tackles the first issue—how to behave in Christian assemblies.

Prayer. The subject of 2:1-10 is prayer in the assembly, although 2:3-7 is an aside in the middle of the discussion on prayer. Some believe that Paul includes only men in his instructions about prayer, but the “also” at the beginning of 2:9 makes it probable, although not absolutely necessary, that he is continuing his discussion of prayer by including women as well. The emphasis is on the life of those who pray. Men’s hands are to be holy, signified by the lack of anger and arguing (2:8). Contrast this with praying hands that are full of blood in Isa. 1:15. When women pray they are not

to be adorned ostentatiously in a manner that is out of character for women who profess godliness through their good deeds (2:9-10). This is consistent with what we found in I Cor. 11:5, 13, where women prayed in the Corinthian assemblies.

Women or wives? A key question for the proper understanding of 2:11-15 is whether Paul has in mind Christian wives, as he did in I Cor. 14:34-35, or all Christian women who might be in an assembly. The weight of the evidence supports the former option. First, the phrase, “in all subjection” (2:11), as we have seen, refers to only to wives to husbands not women to men in general. Secondly, the references to Adam and Eve (2:13-14) relate primarily to events in the lives of a married couple, not to men and women generically. Finally, the reference to child bearing (2:15) can apply appropriately only to a married woman.

Women/wives Teaching in Ephesian Assemblies. Note, first of all, that women/wives were already teaching in the Ephesian assemblies when Paul wrote this epistle, else he would not have needed to issue this corrective. This is a significant point, because Paul spent more time with this church than any other (Acts 19:8-10), and he had a particularly intimate relationship with its leaders (Acts 20:36-38). If the silencing of women/wives in churches under Paul’s influence was absolute, as is assumed by many today, we are hard pressed to explain the presence of this practice in such an established Pauline church. More likely Paul’s point has to do with something other than the *fact* that they were teaching, such as the *manner* or *content* of these women/wives’ teaching, thus prompting him to prohibit them from continuing to teach. This is not unlike the situation in Corinth, where there was nothing per se wrong with the Corinthians eating their own meals when they got together. It was the manner in which they were doing it that led to his stopping the practice (I Cor. 11:17-22).

Manner of the teaching. This revolves around the meaning of the word translated, “to assume authority over” in the NIV (2:12). The word (*authenteō*) is used only here in the NT, and so far very few pre-Christian examples of the word have been found. Most modern English translators render the word as “assume/have/exercise authority over” or “domineer.” This is probably as close to the correct meaning as we are able to get, given the current state of the evidence. Some have argued that the Greek construction with the two infinitives (“to teach” and “to exercise authority over”) suggests that the second infinitive should be taken as modifying or clarifying the first. The meaning would then be “I do not permit a woman/wife to teach a man/husband in a domineering way.” This would violate proper submission (2:11) and quietness (2:11-12). The reference to submission suggests that these teachers were wives whose deportment in the assembly was inconsistent with the way they should act in public in the presence of their husbands. A further hint of this may be found in the fact that some women were violating public decency by the way they adorned themselves (2:9), another embarrassment to their husbands.

Content of the teaching. Precisely what unhealthy teaching these women may have been doing is unknown, but a plausible case can be made for one possibility,

based on the available evidence (see **The Setting** above). Marriage was under attack by the false teachers (4:3). Some younger women in Ephesus had already turned away after Satan (5:15), and this squares with the fact that the heretics in II Timothy targeted women (3:6-7). In response to this pressure on marriage and traditional family roles, Paul urges younger widows to remarry and assume traditional wifely roles (I Tim. 5:14). In Titus, older women are urged to teach younger married women what is proper in their domestic settings (2:3-5). It does not take much to conceive of certain women/wives as buying into this assault on traditional family relationships and duties; adorning themselves immodestly in public assemblies (2:9); exhibiting unsubmitive behavior (2:11); and rather than learning in quietness, teaching in a domineering way (2:12) a message that can be characterized as “different doctrine” (1:3).

Whether this is precisely what prompted Paul’s prohibition of women/wives teaching in the assembly, it, nevertheless, provides a plausible alternative to the view that Paul’s restrictions were absolute and unrelated to the specific situation in Ephesus.

Adam and Eve. Paul supports his point by appealing to the story of Adam and Eve in the second and third chapters of Genesis. Unfortunately he does not tell his readers the reason he introduces this couple’s experience into his argument. We have to figure that out ourselves.

“Adam was formed first, then Eve” (2:13). Though Paul does not state this, these words have traditionally been taken to mean that Adam’s priority in creation placed him over Eve. While this is possible, it does not square with the fact that in the Genesis narrative the hierarchical relationship between Adam and Eve came into existence as a consequence of Eve’s sin (Gen. 3:16), suggesting that it did not already exist. An alternative suggestion that has been made is that Paul is calling attention to the fact that Eve was formed to be Adam’s companion and helper, and teaching in a domineering way (I Tim. 2:12) is not consistent with that relationship. In the end it doesn’t matter much, though, because Paul’s second reference is to the event that brought about a wife’s submission to her husband (Gen. 3:16).

“Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived became a transgressor” (2:14). Again, though Paul does not state this, the traditional interpretation has been that women should not be allowed to teach, because in their makeup they are more susceptible to being deceived than men. The inability to come up with something better and more consistent with reality than this has been a thorn in the side of the traditional interpretation of this overall passage. The usual argument is that 2:12 prohibits women from teaching *men*. Aside from the fact that this introduces a point Paul does not make, consider what this would mean. Men, who presumably are by nature less vulnerable to deception, are at greater risk of being led astray by more easily deceived women than are children and younger women (Tit. 2:3), whom women *are* allowed to teach. Surely the words must mean something else. The easiest explanation is that this again points us back to the marriage relationship, not to the general relationship between men and women.

Eve's deception and transgression had the consequence of her husband ruling over her (Gen.3:16), or put another way, of her subordination to him (I Tim. 2:11). This helps us see that again, as in I Cor. 14:34-35, Paul has wives in mind in his prohibition.

"Saved through childbearing" (2:15). This is one of the most curious verses in all of Paul's writings. Valiant attempts to make sense of it have been made by its interpreters, and anyone who has ever struggled with this statement knows that no one has come up with a completely satisfactory explanation. We don't know who the subject of "saved" is; we don't know who the subject of "continue" is; and we don't know what "saved" means. But, what all of this meant must have been clear to Paul's readers, because this is the crowning point of his overall argument! If anything that has been written above suggests that something unique is going on in this overall passage, it is this verse. If anything suggests that to have any hope of understanding what is going on in this overall passage we must try to understand the context—what was really going on in Ephesus—it is 2:15.

Conclusions. The traditional view minimizes the importance of the context in arriving at a proper understanding of 2:8-15 and opts instead to read these verses at face value as universal instructions for all settings for all time. In our study we took the road less traveled and were rewarded for it. Just as I Cor. 14:34-35, I Tim. 2:8-15 is best seen as Paul's response to a particular situation in an individual church, probably also involving Christian wives either primarily or entirely. Their conduct in the assemblies in the teaching they were doing and perhaps also their physical adornment was inconsistent with the proper subordination of a wife to her husband in public. They may also have been led astray by the false teachers mentioned in 1:3 and were reflecting that in their teaching. Just as Paul did with those eating their meals in an inappropriate manner in the Corinthian assemblies (I Cor. 11:17-22), he puts a complete stop to these women teaching in the assembly.

CONCLUSIONS FROM OUR STUDY

The traditional interpretation of I Tim. 2:12 runs counter to everything we have learned about the conduct of women in Christian assemblies. It fails to take proper account of the fact that

- Subordination based on gender is a consequence of the fall, where it only applies to the marriage relationship
- There is a marked rise in the status of women that we see beginning with Jesus
- There is no Biblical basis for the subordination of women in general to men in general in any setting (church or society at large)
- Women prayed and prophesied in the assemblies in Corinth
- Even the disruptive behavior in I Cor. 14:34-35 is limited to inappropriate conduct of a few wives in their marriages

The interpretation of I Tim. 2:8-15 that we have proposed or one like it—one that is heavily informed by the context—is the only one consistent with what we read in the rest of the Bible. Therefore, the NT does not prohibit men or women from speaking in any way in Christian assemblies, as long as they do it appropriately.

(Updated April 2013)