

EIGHTH LESSON

WOMEN IN THE LETTERS OF ST. PAUL

Readings for the lesson: 1 Corinthians 11/ 14:34-25/ 1 Timothy 2:11-14/

Contextual understanding: There is no text without a context. In order to understand the treatment of women in the OT and NT, we need to dig into the cultural context of the Jewish society. Needless to say that Jewish society in the OT was a patriarchal society making women live in the shadows rather than in the light of life. Although Eve was created equal by God, taking the rib (equality) from Adam and making Eve, women in general were treated unequal, first under the authority of their father, then their husbands after marriage and in the eventuality of their death, they were under their husband's brothers. This subordination is seen in all aspects of a woman's life in the OT. Marriage was a parental arrangement and she was possessed by her husband and she called him Lord and Master. If she could not procure children, the husband can take another woman for procreation, an accepted practice (Sarah - Hagar). They were not treated equal in political and religious life as well. Except a few courageous women like Deborah, Ruth, Esther, Judith, most women were subordinate to men standing behind their husbands, assisting them in worship, handling the domestic chores. However, when we come to the NT, we find clearly a healthy and liberate approach to women. Jesus sharply contrasted from his own culture and people.

How did Jesus treat women? He treated women with great respect, compassion and dignity. How? Jewish culture in the first century was decidedly patriarchal. The daily prayers of Jewish men included this prayer of thanksgiving: "Praised be God that he has not created me a woman" A woman's place was thought to be in the home, bearing and raising children. Men were not to greet women in public. Some Jewish writers of Jesus' time, such as Philo, taught that women should never leave the home except to go to the synagogue. A woman was almost always under the protection and authority of a man. This left women in a very vulnerable position within Judaism. They had little access to property or inheritance, except through a male relative. Any money a woman earned belonged to her husband. Men could legally divorce a woman for almost any reason, simply by handing her a writ of divorce. A woman, however, could not divorce her husband.

In the area of religious practice, women were in many ways overlooked. Men were required to pray certain prayers daily, but women were not. While the study of Scripture was regarded as extremely important for men, women were not allowed to study the sacred texts. **Rabbi Eliezer**, a first-century teacher, is noted for saying, "***Rather should the word of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman.***" At the Temple in Jerusalem, women were restricted to an outer court. In synagogues they were separated from the men and not permitted to read aloud. They were not allowed to bear witness in a religious court. But Jesus defies these expectations on many occasion which have implications for us.

Jesus Speaks with Women in Public: First, Jesus refuses to treat women as inferior. Given the decidedly negative cultural view of women in Jesus' time, the Gospel writers each testify to Jesus' treating women with respect and presenting Jesus going against suppressing cultural norms of the patriarchal society. He recognized their dignity, their desires and their gifts. He steps forward in a crowd of mourners to speak with the widow at Nain in public and calls her son back to life (Luke 7:11-17). He cures a woman who had been crippled for 18 years, laying hands on her in the Temple and saying, "Woman, you are set free of your infirmity" (Luke 13:12). When the leader of the synagogue becomes indignant that Jesus has healed a woman on the Sabbath, Jesus uses a title of particular dignity for her, "daughter of Abraham" (Luke 13:16). While the expression "son of Abraham" was often used to indicate that a male Jew was recognized as bound by covenant to God, women had never been called "daughters of Abraham." With this title, Jesus recognizes this woman as having equal worth. In John 4:4-42, He initiates a conversation with a foreigner, a Samaritan. Her surprise is included in the narrative: "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (John 4:9). Jesus not only speaks with her but also enters into a prolonged dialogue. Ultimately, he reveals his identity as her Messiah.

Jesus treats with Respect and Compassion: Jesus refuses to view women as unclean during menstrual times or any time with flow of blood. During these times, women were not allowed to participate in most religious rituals. Anything or anyone she touched was deemed unclean. The most dramatic story concerning a woman in this state is the account of the woman who had a flow of blood for 12 years (Luke 8:43-48). Luke emphasizes Jesus' compassion for the woman by the way he situates the story. This frightened and suffering woman, who has been ill and consequently isolated for years, touches his cloak. Jesus turns his attention from the synagogue official to the woman. He wants to know who touched his garment. By religious norms, the woman's touch—even of his cloak—rendered Jesus unclean. She could have probably expected anger from Jesus for her public behavior but she was totally surprised by Jesus addressing her "Daughter," telling her of that her faith has saved her and sending her in peace (8:48).

Jesus recognizes the dignity of women in situations that seem to demand judgment by ritual law. For example, the sinful woman who anoints Jesus (Luke 7:36-50) and that of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11). In John's account of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11), a trap is laid for Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees who bring the woman to Jesus present the case, awaiting the judgment and the punishment from Jesus. Jesus wisely evades the entire legal debate and confronts them instead with a more fundamental truth—that none of them is without sin. When the accusers have all left, Jesus speaks compassionately with the woman. He does not gloss over her sin, but in his refusal to condemn her, he invites her to a new place of freedom and a new image of herself.

Women Disciples: Jesus steps over expected boundaries between men and women by his acceptance of women as disciples. Unlike rabbis of his day, Jesus taught women about Scripture and his way of love. Matthew tells of Jesus' mother and brothers asking to speak to him. "He said in reply, 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers'" (Matthew

12:46-50). His use of both masculine and feminine words clearly indicates that some of his disciples were women. The familiar story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42 highlights Jesus' acceptance and blessing of Mary's desire to learn. She is described as one who "sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak" (Luke 10:39). This is the typical position of the male disciple. To sit at the feet of a rabbi meant that a person was one of his disciples. Martha, on the other hand, takes the expected woman's role of providing hospitality. Perhaps she herself thinks it improper for Mary to act as a disciple. Regardless, Jesus will not deprive Mary of her opportunity. "Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her" (Luke 10:42).

Of particular interest is the fact that Jesus not only taught women, but some women traveled with him and ministered to him. In Luke 8:1-3, Jesus is described as journeying from village to village, preaching and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. "The Twelve" were with him and several women: "Mary, called Magdalene, from whom several demons had gone out, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources." The gospel writer Mark, too, says of the women present at Jesus' crucifixion, "These women had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him" (15:41). Women were last to leave the place of Jesus' crucifixion and first at the empty tomb (Matthew 27:61; 28:1), indicating that the transforming power of Jesus had given the women courage and boldness to follow Him openly. In a marvelous display of the women's faith and God's approval, those women became the world's first witnesses of the resurrection (Matthew 28:8). Mary Magdalene is called the apostle to the apostles as she was the first one to announce the disciples and everyone the resurrection of Jesus.

Women in the writings of St. Paul. When we read the letters of St. Paul, we cannot avoid some disturbing passages about women and based on those passages, any woman, especially a progressive woman and feminist, might see St. Paul silencing women and promoting gender hierarchy as God's will, ultimately establishing oppressive Jewish culture towards women and some even say based on few passages of St. Paul, Christianity is treating women as second-class citizens. That idea is based primarily on two passages: 1 Timothy 2:11-14/ 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

1 Timothy 2:11-14: *A woman must receive instruction silently and under complete control. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. Further, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed.*

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 *Women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not allowed to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. But if they want to learn anything, they should ask their husbands at home. For it is improper for a woman to speak in the church.*

At first glance, these passages seem refusing women to speak in the church for any reason. In both cases, a closer examination of context is necessary. The whole of 1 Timothy 2:11-

14, quoted only partially above, is this: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.” Here Paul specifies the subjects of **Teaching and Assuming Authority**. She shows her submission to authority by learning. It is not an absolute command for women to remain silent at all times in all services. There are also some contextual considerations in the 1 Cor 14 passage. Earlier in the same epistle, Paul mentions situations where women seem to be allowed to pray and prophesy in public: “But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved” (1 Cor 11:5). Commentators suggest various ways of reconciling 1 Cor 11 (women pray and prophesy) with 1 Cor 14 (women are silent)

Chapter 11 acknowledges that, in the Corinthian church, women prayed and prophesied, but Paul reserves his condemnation of women prophesying for chapter 14. In each of the above interpretations, the conclusion is the same: 1 Cor 14 teaches that women are to be silent in the general assembly of the church. Taking a closer look at 1 Cor 14, it seems concerned about orderliness in assemblies because the church of Corinth was noted for the disorder rampant in that assembly (verse 33). Everyone in the church service was participating whenever and however they desired. Those with the gift of tongues were speaking simultaneously, and no one was concerned with interpreting what was being said. There was a chaos with no edification or instruction (verses 5, 12, and 19). To remedy this, Paul instructs a number of groups to “be quiet” at certain times and under certain conditions: Verses 27–28a, Those who would speak in a tongue must “**keep silent**” if someone else is speaking or if there is no one to interpret what is said. Verses 29–31a, A prophet must “**be silent**” if someone else has the floor. Verses 34–35, The women should “**keep silent**” to show proper submission. Keeping silent is meant for everyone. It is not reserved for women alone.

The command for women to remain silent as well as other speakers in the church service has a reason. The two specific matters discussed in chapter 14 are speaking in tongues and prophesying. Both tongues-speaking and prophesying involve *teaching* and require some measure of spiritual authority. Scripture consistently teaches that spiritual authority in the church resides with men, based on God’s order of creation 1 Tim 2:13-14 “For Adam was formed first, then Eve. Further, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed” And therefore, women were not allowed to speak in tongues or prophesy in the general assembly of the church in order to give the spiritual authority to men in the assembly. Here, Paul is not addressing preaching or teaching. He is addressing behavior “in the pews.” The asking of questions should not be disruptive. Paul doesn’t rebuke their praying and prophesying in church. On the contrary, he gives them instructions on how to do it in the right way, in a way that allows them to speak but that at the same time honors male headship.” 1 Cor 11, 1 Cor 14, and 1 Tim 2 all teach male spiritual leadership in the home and church as a universal principle. Pastors and elders are men, and women come under that authority with the rest of the church. Women were expected to maintain the order God has designed for the church and show her submission to authority in culturally appropriate ways (in Corinth, a head covering).

There are many roles a woman can fill in the church and Scripture does not forbid her from singing or praying or otherwise participating in the service. But bringing the Word of God to the entire congregation was not one of her roles. That task was reserved for men. St. Paul was only acting on the existing cultural practice. However when we read the letters of St. Paul, we could see the role of women in his apostolic ministry. He named several women among his “co-workers in the gospel” along with such people as Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Apollos. Paul praised women like **Priscilla and Lydia** who were leaders in the early church. Paul’s evangelistic ministry was one of partnership with women.

Presence of Women in St. Paul: We know that Paul was a highly-trained scholar of the Old Testament. In his writings, he reconciles the law with grace, the Torah with the Living Word. Jewish priests had to be males of a specific lineage, but Paul said believers in Christ are all priests -- Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, males and females. Acts 16:13-16 recounts the story of the first church in Europe. At Philippi, Paul encountered a group of women praying. One was **Lydia**, who opened her home to Paul and the new converts. In Phil. 4:3, we learn of two other women in the Philippian church, **Euodia and Syntyche**, who Paul said, “labored with me in the gospel.” When Paul arrived in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila invited him to stay with them until they all relocated to Ephesus some months later. When Paul left Ephesus for his missionary tour, he left Priscilla and Aquila in charge of the church that met in their home. When Apollos arrived in Ephesus, he was an eloquent believer and teacher, but was uninstructed in some doctrines. Priscilla and Aquila taught him more about the gospel. This remarkable couple are mentioned six times in the New Testament, and most of the time Priscilla is mentioned first suggesting that Paul considered her the leader of the two. In Romans 16:1, Paul mentions **Phoebe** as a “deacon of the church of Cenchrea.” She carried Paul’s letter to the Romans from Greece, a perilous journey by sea and land. Paul commended her work in the church at Cenchrea. In I Corinthians 12, Romans 12:6-8 and Eph.4:11 Paul discusses at length the “spiritual gifts” given to the church. Nowhere does Paul say that certain gifts or callings are for men and others for women. All are given by the Spirit to build up the church.

How do we reconcile all of this with Paul's often-quoted words about women being silent and not teaching men? The same way we deal with other passages that obviously were meant for specific times and cultures. Five times the New Testament says, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Do we follow that? Paul tells Timothy to “drink a little wine for the sake of your stomach.” Does that mean wine is the “biblical cure” for all stomach ailments? Most of Paul’s letters are written to address specific problems. That may account for that one verse about “women being silent.” The main thing to remember is that in I Cor. 11 (same letter) Paul told women how they were to pray and prophesy in public meetings: with heads covered. He did not say they should NOT pray and prophesy!

The letter to Timothy was a personal letter dealing with problems that Timothy knew well. Paul showed by his life practices and his teaching that women were to use their God-given gifts for the benefit of the church of Christ. Paul was a devout follower of Jesus, whose

dealings with women indicated that they could teach and lead in whatever way God led them. The church has suffered through the centuries by discouraging and disqualifying half its members, many of whom have been called by the Spirit to serve. A healthy church needs every member and the gifts they bring. Let us build the church, not in our own image, but in the image of him who died to save us. Acts 2: 17-18 It will come to pass in the last days,' God says, 'that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and ***your daughters shall prophesy***, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy'.

Why does the Bible speak against braided hair?

1 Tim 2:9 ***“women should adorn themselves with proper conduct, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hairstyles and gold ornaments, or pearls, or expensive clothes”***

1 Peter 3:1-3, ***“you wives should be subordinate to your husbands so that, even if some disobey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct when they observe your reverent and chaste behavior. Your adornment should not be an external one: braiding the hair, wearing gold jewelry, or dressing in fine clothes”***

Both the places, braided hair is seemingly rejected. At first glance, these verses appear to admonish against specific hair and clothing styles, but, when taken in context, they instead refer to bigger topics: **humility and modesty**. In first-century Roman culture, women would customarily braid or twist their hair high onto their heads, often decorating their locks with jewels, gold adornments, and more to garner attention. They used to come to synagogue with braid hair. The apostles who were responsible for reverent services for the public, corrected them saying that their external attraction is not in line with the humility of Christ. Jesus says in Mat 23:12, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

1 Pet 3:3-5 speaks of true beauty: “Your adornment should not be an external one: braiding the hair, wearing gold jewelry, or dressing in fine clothes, but rather the hidden character of the heart, expressed in the imperishable beauty of a gentle and calm disposition, which is precious in the sight of God. For this is also how the holy women who hoped in God once used to adorn themselves and were subordinate to their husbands”. God sees the heart, and a beautiful woman has a “gentle and quiet spirit,” whether or not her hair is plaited into fancy braids. The best attire for a Christian woman is “good deeds,” whether or not she has the braided hair, jeweled adornments, and stylish clothing of the day. Scripture does not teach it is a sin to groom oneself to feel more attractive, but it is sinful to do so with the prideful intention of turning heads, and the good works are always more important than the hairdo. Christians should strive to maintain a godly perspective on how they present themselves to the world, demonstrating God’s glory with their bodies (1 Cor 6:19-20) and caring about the spiritual state of their brothers and sisters in Christ (Rom 15:1-2). Rather than focusing on outward appearances, an inward focus on developing Christlike behavior is more profitable.

Should Christian women wear head coverings as Paul commanded? 1 Cor 11:3-16 addresses the issue of women and head coverings. The context of the entire passage of 1 Cor 11:3-16 is submission to the God-given order and "chain of command." A "covering" on a woman's head is used as an illustration of the order, headship, and the authority of God. The key verse of this passage is 1 Cor 11:3 "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." The order is: God the Father, God the Son, the man or husband, and the woman or wife. The veil or covering on the head of a believing Corinthian wife showed that she was under the authority of her husband, and therefore under submission to God. We must take this verse in the context in which it is presented. "Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering" (1 Cor 11:14-15).

Therefore, in the context of this passage, a woman who is wearing her hair longer marks herself out distinctively as a woman and not a man. The Apostle Paul is saying here that in the Corinthian culture, when a wife's hair was longer than her husband's, it showed her submission to his headship. The roles of the male and female are designed by God to portray a profound spiritual lesson, that is of submission to the will and the order of God. In Jewish culture, a woman with shaved head was a disgrace. Shaved head is a sign of mourning in Deut 21:12. In the Corinthian culture, women normally wore a head covering as a symbol of their submission to their husbands. Paul affirms the rightness of following that cultural mandate. Dispensing with the head coverings on women would send the entirely wrong signal to the culture at large. In fact, Paul says that, if a Christian woman refuses her head covering, she might as well shave her hair off, too (verse 6). A woman who refused to wear a covering in that culture was basically saying, "I refuse to submit to God's order." Therefore, the apostle Paul is teaching the Corinthians that hair length or the wearing of a "covering" by the woman was an outward indication of a heart attitude of submission to God and to His established authority.

God's order is that the husband is the head of the wife as God is the head of Christ, but there is no inequality or inferiority implied. God and Christ are equal and united, just as the husband and the wife are one. This is not a passage that teaches the woman is inferior to man or that she should be submissive to every man. It is teaching God's order and spiritual headship in the marriage relationship. In the Corinthian culture, a woman who covered her head during worship or when she was in public displayed her submission to authority. In today's culture, we no longer view a woman's wearing of a head covering as a sign of submission. In most modern societies, scarves and hats are fashion accessories. A woman has the choice to wear a head covering if she views it as a sign of her submission to the authority of her husband. However, it is a personal choice and not something that should be used to judge spirituality. The real issue here is the heart attitude of obedience to God's authority and submission to His established order "as to the Lord" (Ephe 5:22). God is far more concerned with an attitude of submission than an outward display of submission via a head covering.

What is biblical womanhood? Biblical womanhood is the distinguishing character of a woman as defined by the Bible. When God created two genders (Gen 1:27; 5:2; Matthew 19:4), He also instituted different roles for each gender. The quest for biblical womanhood begins in the same place that biblical manhood begins. Galatians 3:28 states that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In Christ, we have equal value and equal responsibility to obey and serve the Lord. One common error in discussing biblical womanhood is to mix cultural stereotypes with scriptural truth. However, biblical womanhood does not mean that every woman must conform to a societal standard of femininity. For some women, embracing their femininity will mean they pursue careers in medicine, construction, or law enforcement because God has gifted them to serve in those areas. For others, raising children and making a home is a fulfillment of their God-given desires. A woman who models biblical womanhood has a gentle and quiet spirit, but she can also lead a corporation, head a maintenance crew, or discover medical cures. In fact, as she allows the Holy Spirit to control her, God blesses her natural gifting to accomplish even more than she could if she tried to succeed in her own way. When a woman turns her attention to the beauty of her soul, she becomes more like Jesus, becoming productive. According to Scripture, the wife’s role is different from the husband’s role, but not inferior. Eph 5:22–23 is the passage most often quoted in regard to the wife’s role: “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.”

However, we err when we treat this passage as a stand-alone commandment for women. It is sandwiched between even stronger commands to the church at large. Verse 18 begins this section with, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” The rest of the section instructs husbands to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (verse 25). The command for wives is merely a reflection of the attitude that every believer should adopt (Phil 2:3). When a godly husband loves His wife the way Christ loves the church, a godly wife has little difficulty in submitting to his leadership. Biblical womanhood is more than a career path or the ability to reproduce and nurture. Because every human being carries a unique facet of God’s own nature (Gen 1:27), we glorify Him by reflecting that nature to the world. Women can reveal God’s glory in ways unique to their gender, as can men. In this confusing day when gender identity has become a matter of preference, it is vital that those who know and love God and His Word remain grounded in His truth. God designed men to reflect His glory through biblical manhood. He designed women to reflect other aspects of His glory through biblical womanhood. When we all seek to honor Him in every part of our lives, we will live harmoniously, fulfilling complementary roles as we carry out the mission Jesus gave to all of us (Math 28:19). The Gospels point us toward including women’s voices and gifts. While we live in a time and culture far different from that of the historical Jesus, his way of welcoming and responding to women has much to teach us. Mary Magdalene is called an Apostle to the Apostles because she was the first one to announce the good news of Jesus’ resurrection to the Apostles

Women in the Catholic faith: Catholic church proclaims the dignity of women and helps them to live out their authentic femininity. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, tells us that woman is created in the image and likeness of God and is *very good* (Genesis 1: 26-31). The Church has always acknowledged and affirmed the dignity of woman and her equality to man. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "'Being man' or 'being woman' is a reality which is good and willed by God... Man and woman are both with one and the same dignity 'in the image of God'" (CCC 369). Further, the Church doesn't just claim that men and women are the same; it recognizes the special beauty of woman that makes her different from—but still equal in dignity to—man.

The Blessed Virgin Mary: God could have saved us in any number of ways, but he chose to spend nine months in the womb of a woman and come to us in human form. For that reason, we revere our Immaculate Mother Mary as the holiest of the saints and ask her to help us on our own path to sainthood. The Church honors Mary with numerous feast days. There have been many noble men throughout the story of salvation history, but only Mary is given the honor of being Mother of the Church and Queen of the Universe.

The Church's teachings on abortion and contraception: The Church has always been and will always be pro-life—which is unquestionably pro-woman. Abortion does not empower women; Not only does abortion make women more susceptible to mental health problems, it fosters a culture in which human life is not valued, sex is stripped of its sacred meaning, intimacy without commitment is expected, and fertility is viewed as a burden. This type of culture is not conducive to authentic feminism. The Church's teaching against contraception also seeks to push back against this culture. Instead of artificial contraceptives, the Church advocates for natural family planning, which uses the natural biology of the woman's body to accurately and naturally space out pregnancies.

Women Saints: There are more than 750 canonized women saints, acknowledged by the Church for living a life of heroic virtue. Of the 750 women recognized by the Church as saints, four of those women are Doctors of the Church. Of course, there are many more unknown female saints.

Mulieris Dignitatem by Pope Saint John Paul II: In his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II speaks about women's dignity and coins the term, 'feminine genius': "The Church gives thanks for all the manifestations of the feminine 'genius' which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all the fruits of feminine holiness." *Mulieris Dignitatem* defends the equality of women, the vocation to love, the mutual submission of husbands and wives, male/female relationship, Jesus's modeling of how to treat women, the significance of Jesus's mother for today's Christians, and the nature of the relationship between Christ and His Church including the role of the Eucharist as expressing the total self-gift of Christ and making possible the reciprocal total self-gift of the recipient.