

**The Role of Women in the Church:
Questions about appropriate involvement in activities during which men are present
By Bob Young**

[Note: An elder friend contacted me seeking biblical perspective and orientation concerning a question that has arisen in his congregation. He desired to provide biblical, spiritual leadership without being reactionary. He asked me to write down some thoughts that would address the specific situation and provide guidance. Some of the specifics in his church situation can be seen in the article.]

Several biblical texts from the New Testament are customarily cited to address the question of women's roles in the church. Among the most frequently cited texts are 1 Tim. 2:11-12 and 1 Cor. 14:34-35. Of course, many other texts shed light on the question, some directly and some indirectly. A partial listing of other texts to be studied would include (1) Luke 8:3 where the women provided support for those traveling with Jesus, (2) Romans 16:1-2 in which Phoebe is set forth as a matron of the church, and (3) Titus 2 where the responsibility of older women to behave appropriately is the subject, with the stated result is that they will be able to teach (by their example?) the younger women. An explanation of the Titus 2 text is needed to show that its application is indirect (principles) and not direct (specific). The admonition to the older women to live in a certain way with a certain result does not preclude other activities, and thus the application of this text to the question of teaching men is not valid. A valid negative of the text is that if older women do not behave appropriately, they will not have the desired result of teaching the younger women. The careful application of the "law of silence" in this text will not yield the conclusion that the only group the older women can teach is the younger women, since such would mean that the older women could not teach the older women. That which proves too much proves nothing.

Some have pointed to Acts 18:24-26 and have sought to support a position based on the question of Priscilla and Aquila teaching Apollos, but this text is used by both sides, due to varying manuscripts. The support for putting Priscilla first in the word order is stronger than that for putting Aquila first, and the text ultimately proves nothing about the public teaching process. It was teaching done privately and in a home, and does not provide helpful guidance regarding the question of a woman's involvement in "church activities." In parallel, consider the fact that a mother has a biblical responsibility to continue to teach her son, even after he is baptized. Especially in a day when some children are baptized at age 8 or 9, it is unthinkable that a mother would leave all of the teaching of her son to a husband at that point. Further, in too many homes there is no husband to do the teaching, and thus the son becomes unruly and untaught in the things of the Lord. I mention this matter with some personal awareness, because I was raised in a single-parent home and am grateful for the biblical teaching my mother did after my baptism at a relatively early age.

Since the primary texts in 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 give both specifics for the worship assembly and Christian principles, it will be helpful to consider the practical application the churches have used regarding the role and involvement of women. One area of concern is our adult Bible classes. While many women are hesitant to speak up in a Bible class, most churches

allow women to speak, both to ask questions and to make comments. I know of no mainline church of Christ that allows women to serve in a primary, authoritative role as “the teacher” in gender-mixed Bible classes. This demonstrates the problem. We want to avoid women having an authoritative teaching role over men, but we are aware that it is possible for women to be involved in certain activities when they are not in authority or when they are not “teaching” but commenting. We have correctly observed that the questions involved are “authority” and “teaching”. A woman involved under the oversight and direction of a class teacher is not in authority, and the purpose of her involvement is not “to teach a man”. The question involves both authority and purpose.

To summarize: when a woman is commenting in an adult Bible class, she does not have authority, and although a man overhearing the comment might learn something, that does not make the woman “a teacher” because her purpose is not to teach that man. This combination of authority and purpose stays within the admonition not to usurp authority and not to teach (be a teacher). Too narrow a position in this matter would prohibit a man from reading any book written by a woman because he might learn something, thus making her “a teacher”.

Another area of concern is our children’s Bible classes, both regular classes and especially in special events like Vacation Bible School. The mere presence of a man in a children’s class does not make the sister teaching that class a “teacher” of that man. For example, a man may temporarily enter the classroom to count the number present. The fact that he overhears a detail of an Old Testament story that he did not know does not make the woman teaching the children in the class his “teacher” and does not contradict 1 Timothy 2. She has authority in the class, but her purpose is not to teach those who overhear, but to teach the children. The question is one of both “authority” and “official teaching”. Perhaps a man is actually stationed in a classroom of unruly first and second graders during VBS, since many of the children attending are unchurched and do not know how to behave. The man is not the teacher; the class is being taught by a woman, but the man is present as a disciplinarian. The woman teaching has teaching authority over the children, but not over the man. Why? The answer lies in defining the purpose of those involved. The man is not in the class as a learner or student, but as a worker, and the relationship that exists between the man and the woman is not one of learner-teacher. They are co-workers, each performing an assigned role. The instructions concerning authority and teaching a man are being followed.

To summarize: when a woman accepts a delegated role to help with a children’s learning activity, she is granted some level of authority over the children, but not over others who may be present. Her authority is as “teacher” over the children, not over everyone in the room. For example, if a woman is narrating a puppet show for children in a multi-purpose building during VBS, she may reprimand the children who are unruly and may forbid them to leave the room. If an adult observer misbehaves, she would not reprimand the adult nor would she forbid him to leave the room. Clearly, she is not his “teacher” and does not have authority over him.

Sometimes special events such as VBS may include a time when the children tell what they have learned. The young girls who tell what they have learned are not “teaching” the men or fathers present. Why? Because these girls do not have any authority and the purpose is not to teach but to demonstrate what they have learned. Children may be involved in activities such as

puppet shows, and the children who are behind the scenes and helping the puppets “speak” might say something that teaches an adult sitting and watching. Girls who provide girls’ voices for girls’ puppets do not disobey 1 Timothy 2 in such involvement, because they do not have authority and their purpose is not to teach the men who may happen to be present as observers (not as students). Again, the men may learn something, but that is not the purpose of this children’s activity. If the church members are invited to attend the puppet activity, do they attend as observers or as students to whom the show is directed? Is the puppet activity part of a formal worship assembly, or is it an informal activity without required attendance?

Examples could be multiplied of situations where women could be involved in a teaching activity, with authority over those being taught (according to the purpose of the class), and there could inadvertently or intentionally be a Christian man present, although the purpose of the class is not to teach the Christian man. Churches face such situations in children’s Bible classes, bus ministries (woman teacher on the bus with male bus driver), Vacation Bible Schools, puppet ministries, after-school programs, Christian schools (woman teacher with male administrator), and other activities. All of these have in common that they are not the public assembly for worship.

Almost certainly, the Bible texts are addressing the public worship assemblies. It is not clear that the Bible directly guides the many different kinds of situations the church might face today such as outlined above. At best, we have principles that govern the actions of the church. In closing, let me suggest an appropriate approach for churches that want to maintain a clear commitment to the teachings of Scripture in this matter.

- (1) Recognize that the questions involved are authority and purpose. A woman inadvertently “teaching” a man in a situation where she has no authority to so teach and without that specific purpose does not disobey Scripture.
- (2) Recognize that the Bible teaching was designed to control the worship assemblies and that we have principles and not specifics when it comes to a variety of activities outside the public worship assemblies.
- (3) Be cautious about the too-strict application of the practice in non-worship settings, including how we understand the responsibilities of parents in the home.
- (4) The church should maintain the principles of subjection and submission, for both men and women, even when someone is given or accepts a task. A woman teaching in VBS or a children’s Bible class is still to be in submission. Likewise, the principle of subjection extends also to a man teaching an adult Bible class.
- (5) Make certain that the Biblical principles and practices are followed in the public worship assembly so that women are not placed in authoritative roles or roles that are designed with the purpose of teaching a man during the public worship.