

Changing Traditions: Letting God Speak through Women in Church

“Just because it’s what’s done doesn’t mean it’s what should be done”

- Branagh, 2015

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Abstract: The Stone Campbell Movement has historically prohibited women from publicly teaching baptized male believers. This tradition was founded on carefully selected Scriptures that were originally taken out of context and clearly contradict other Biblical accounts instructing women to teach. Through the continuation of this tradition, the church movement prioritizes tradition rather than obeying God. This tradition hurts the body of Christ by keeping over half of the people in churches silent. The validity of this tradition has been debated by top theologians since it was created, but continues to be a major church issue today. In this essay, the out-of-context Scriptures used to forbid female teachers will be put in context and placed alongside Scriptures that address this issue. This essay will also explore how the Stone Campbell Movement can align their traditional beliefs about female teachers with the Bible's commands in order to unite the church under God instead of leaving it bound under traditions.

While growing up in the Church of Christ, my siblings and I were taught that we must give our lives to serve God with all our hearts, souls, and minds (Deuteronomy 6:5). Then a boy in my older sister's Sunday school class got baptized. In the Church of Christ, this meant that this 12-year-old boy was now considered a Christian man who, while in church, had to be taught exclusively by other Christian men. To carry out this tradition, a beloved female teacher had to be replaced with a male, and none of the girls would be allowed to pray or read Scripture aloud while in class. This was the first time any of us children had ever been told someone could not use their voice to serve God simply because of their gender. We read in Scripture that everything that has breath must praise the Lord and nothing could separate us from the love of God, not even gender (Psalm 50:6, Romans 8:39, Galatians 3:28). In this church, however, young girls were being taught that because we were females, we were not allowed speak in church. As an eight-year-old, I was being told that instead of fully submitting my voice to God, I must allow only Christian men to speak for the church and myself.

This teaching left me with so many unanswered questions and contradicting beliefs that still affect my life today. I began to wonder if congregations in the Stone Campbell Movement were teaching human traditions or commands of God when they silence women in church, and if this tradition was harming people in the Stone Campbell Movement as well as those influenced by them. The Stone Campbell Movement is a section under Protestantism that contains The Church of Christ, The Disciples of God, and The Christian Church. All of these church denominations hold the same basic doctrinal belief that "We speak where the Bible speaks, and we are silent where the Bible is silent" (Campbell, qtd in Richardson 1897, pg.236). The churches under the Stone Campbell Movement follow similar beliefs and practice similar traditions, such as silencing women in church. However, when these Scriptures and the way

congregations apply them is studied, the biblical inaccuracy of this tradition is made grossly apparent. After studying a typical church service in congregations that choose to follow these traditions, it is obvious that women are not kept completely silent, as church tradition makes Scripture command (Rowland, 1991, pg.40 and 40-51). The fact that these churches are not practicing what they preach is sufficient reason to examine closely both what they preach and practice, as well as how they both align with Scriptural mandates. When examined in the original Greek, it becomes evident that Scripture does not silence women at all, but instead presents gender equality as a foundational value of the early church. If the congregations under the Stone Campbell Movement continue to teach the Biblical fallacy that women must remain silent in church, then they promote false doctrine and diminish the value of God's design. By telling women they must remain silent in church, the Stone Campbell Movement is instructing women that traditions are more important than allowing God to speak through them. This teaching suggests that women are incapable of being used by God as teachers and speakers. This limits God to speak through less than half the church. The diminishing of God's handiwork not only affects the lives of men and women in the local church, but the global body of Christ as well. When we allow one group to remain shackled¹, the entire body hurts as a result. The congregations that carry this tradition must realize that by silencing women, they violate the commands of God and hurt the body of Christ. In the following pages, I hope to demonstrate how harmful this tradition has become to the entire body of Christ, and how the Stone Campbell Movement must reform church traditions.

¹ "I permit not a woman" to remained shackled, Rowland

Why Women Have Been Kept Silent in Church

Women have been silenced in Stone Campbell Movement Churches for years. This act was once believed to be a Biblical mandate, but has now been proven to be a false interpretation of Scripture that is kept for the sake of tradition. Many congregations in The Stone Campbell Movement have acknowledged the fallacy of this tradition and started allowing women to speak in church in order to align their actions with Biblical mandates. However, other congregations in the Stone Campbell Movement have left this tradition unquestioned within the church because it is what has always been done. These congregations must begin to challenge their inherited way of thinking by aligning their traditions with Scripture. When this is done, it can be discovered that the tradition of silencing women in the church was founded because of Scriptures such as 1 Timothy 2:11-12, “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” (1 Timothy 2:11-12). This Scripture has often been translated as meaning exactly what it appears to mean: women must remain silent (Cottrell, 2004, pg. 434). The act of fully silencing women, however, is not completely carried out in most churches who hold this tradition. Women are not kept silent when they “sing congregationally, pray in unison with men, read in unison with men, read responsively with men, and lead songs from the pew” (Rowland, 1991, pg.40). If 1 Timothy 2:11-12 truly demands women remain silent in church, then the church is not keeping them quiet enough.

When 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is interpreted to fully silence women, it is taken out of context and contains many discrepancies from the original Greek. However, Scripture studied in context and with an accurate translation does not silence women at all. 1 Timothy was written to the early church of Ephesus, and “Paul’s attention to false teaching and women occupies about 60 percent of the letter” (Belleville, 2004, pg. 207). Before the church was founded, most women

were not educated and were considered as possessions, not people (A. Cox, personal communication, November 4, 2015). In the early church, however, women were treated as equal recipients of Salvation, and therefore were identified as valuable in God's eyes. When the early church saw women as cherished by God, they began to see women as people. Since women were seen as equals to men, they were allowed to learn in church. However, because they had no prior education, most of these women, when attempting to speak, did not have enough knowledge to teach the more educated males. Their *lack of education* rendered these females false teachers. With this added context, 1 Timothy 2:11-12 should be taken as a correction of false teachers, who in the church of Ephesus, happened to be women (Belleville, 2004, pg. 207). Therefore, in 1 Timothy 2:11-12, Paul was not calling for all women to be silenced, but instead for educated teachers to train the church.

Translational errors in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 also cause people to misunderstand this Scripture. The phrase "assume authority over a man" is "authenteo" in the original Greek (Rowland, 1991, pg. 125). Authenteo when translated in a literal way means "to act on one's own authority" or "to dominate" (Rowland, 1991, pg. 125, Belleville, 2004, pg.209). The difference in assuming authority and domination by a person's own authority completely changes the meaning of this verse. When authority is being exercised, a person has a choice to either submit and listen to the authority or not; when a person is being dominated, they have no choice but to submit. A person can exercise authority over someone without dominating them. This translation also more accurately depicts who has authority to speak, not man but God. When teaching and speaking in the church, women are not commanded to remain silent, but only to speak on God's authority not their own, and to speak without the intention of manipulating the audience. When 1 Timothy 2:12 is read in context and translated with its original message, it

does not demand the silencing of women. Instead, it merely instructs them to teach under God's authority while staying within their educated boundaries, and without forcing their views on others. When this text is isolated "from the larger Biblical witness, and the voices from that larger witness are not heard and taken seriously, then Scripture is being abused" (Brauch, 2009, pg.68-69). 1 Timothy 2:11-12 has been removed from the larger context of its book of the Bible, as well as the Bible as a whole for so long that the tradition founded on it has been falsely taught as a Biblical mandate. When put in the context of the Bible and translated to mean what it originally said in Greek, 1 Timothy 2:11-12 has a message for both men and women. For *no one* should teach the word of God while not functioning under his authority, and we are commanded as Christians not to dominate others with our views but instead to love them for who they are and teach them about who God truly is. Silencing women is far from a Biblical mandate and indeed just the sad outcome of Scripture that has been taken out of context.

Women of the Bible Taught God-Honoring Men

When the traditions based on poorly interpreted Scripture are removed from the church, there is suddenly space for God to speak to the church through all people. This is shown throughout the Old and New Testament in the many stories where God uses women to teach men. For example, in the early church at Ephesus, "a Jewish man, a woman, a Gentile, and a former slave" are all listed as leaders and teachers at different time periods in this church (May, 2015). God used these unlikely people to speak because God sees beyond cultural categories to people willing to serve. In Galatians 3:28 Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The church leaders in Ephesus demonstrated this example of the body of Christ by having leaders who were the most unlikely of people. Some scholars would argue that this Scripture only deals with

salvation, not women speaking (Cottrell, 2004, pg. 433). By interpreting Galatians 3:28 to mean that no one can be kept separate from Salvation, these scholars make the freedom from sins different than the freedoms to share that witness with others. They separate freedom from sin and freedom to tell others about this gift, then violate this Scripture by giving women one freedom without the other. If we are all free in Christ and commanded to tell others about the Salvation given us (Mark 16:15), then women must profess the freedom they have received in Christ, no matter what tradition says. There is no point in freeing a woman from her sin and telling her to keep quiet about it. The church of Ephesus instead of modeling oppression, became a beautiful example of how God intends to use everyone created as proclaimers of his glorious works, including women.

Other examples of God using a woman as a speaker or teacher can be found in 2 Kings 22, and 2 Chronicles 34. In these Scriptures, a woman named Huldah is used by God as a prophetess to the Lord's Head Priest and King Josiah. Huldah's story is quite simple, but unlike Josiah's, highly obscure. In these texts, the High Priest goes to Huldah and asks her to speak to God on their behalf. After she speaks to God for these men, Huldah prophesies to them and instructs them in the way God would have them go. This section of Josiah's story is commonly excluded from Stone Campbell Movement's teachings because it clashes with the tradition of silencing women (Ronnevik, 2015). Throughout both the New and Old Testament, God speaks to his people through women. The tradition of silencing women in church is proven throughout the Scriptures as merely a man-made tradition, not a Biblical mandate or even a Biblical practice.

Why Silencing Women Matters

The Stone Campbell Movement has kept the tradition of silencing women for years. At one time, it was kept because it was seen as Biblical; now it is kept in many churches to avoid

offending those who still view this tradition as truth. In the Christian Church I currently attend, the tradition of silencing women is seen as a misinterpretation of Scripture. Yet, women are still not allowed to teach in the main church services or serve as deaconesses. The elders of the church explain that this is not because the church believes that women should be kept from speaking, but only because it might upset church members who were raised believing this tradition to be true (B. Way, personal communication, October 10, 2015). By keeping this tradition, the comfort of people is placed before obedience to God. In Ephesians 4:3, the Bible says to keep the peace whenever possible, but the Stone Campbell Movement has come to a place where the peace and contentment of people is placed in higher esteem than God's word. This is a very dangerous position to take, for it disregards God's commands and hurts the church in significant ways. When we teach people that females are to remain silent in church, we teach that tradition and comfort are more important than obeying God's commands and female voices being heard, as well as promoting a power structure explicitly overturned by the gospel. This violates God's decrees by adding commands to the Scriptures and hindering women from using the spiritual gift of prophesy (Deuteronomy 4:2, Acts 2:18). This tradition not only violates Scripture, but also opposes the Stone Campbell Movement's doctrinal belief that the church must only speak where the Bible speaks, by contradicting Biblical commands (Richardson 1897, pg. 236). This violation causes the Stone Campbell Movement to devalue women's voices and view those voices as useless to God when compared to a man's, simply because of gender. God created each of us, male and female God created us (Genesis 5:2), then when Jesus died for us, we were left with the Spirit (Acts 1:8). This Spirit gives each of us gifts and he doesn't divide them differently based on men or women, just as he does not differentiate between white or black; he simply gives them as he sees fit (Acts 2:18). By devaluing women's spiritual gift to

prophesy, the Stone Campbell Movement rebels against God's decrees and hurts people in the process.

When the Stone Campbell Movement was first founded, churches for all races were established. There was no difference in black and white people, they were all just people to the Stone Campbell Movement (Kelly, 2004, pg.11). Unfortunately, the example this movement set by not differentiating between race was not adopted by other denominations, who assumed that something as simple as skin color deemed an entire race of people unable to speak on behalf of God. "Part of our responsibility as Christians is to recognize and oppose worldly assumptions that are contrary to the Kingdom of God" (Escobar, 2007, pg. 13). The Stone Campbell Movement knew that man has no authority to hinder another human from using the gifts given to them by God; when it came to race, the movement treated differences in color as irrelevant. The Stone Campbell Movement, however, saw women as less than men, unlike the equality they established between races. Instead of choosing to apply their beliefs about equality despite differences to gender, as they had for race, the church chose to ignore the social injustice towards silencing women. Just because men and women were created differently does not mean they were created unequal. If God chooses to give women the gift of speaking, a man is no one to keep her silent, yet we have continued to allow this tradition to remain. Instead of standing for gender equality as the Stone Campbell Movement stands for racial equality, the movement has made tradition more important than equality. The Stone Campbell Movement cannot follow God, protect women, and continue to deny women the right to speak in churches.

Additionally, this movement-wide act of defiance towards God hurts not only the local church, but the global church as well. In many countries around the world, patriarchy is used to validate the use of women in abusive, master-servant relationships. The cross-cultural struggle of

silencing women “takes on new meaning when you read brutal accounts of female genocide, the trafficking of young girls, honor killings, bride burnings, female genital mutilations, gang rapes, and forced exposure to AIDS. The list goes on” (James, 2011, pg. 30). The Stone Campbell Movement’s realm of influence reaches far beyond the walls of local church buildings and into societies where these atrocities are considered normal. By teaching these cultures about the love God has for both men and women, the church has been given a wonderful opportunity to speak against these cruelties. “Churches that promote male headship [,however,] are sending missionaries abroad, teaching that women must submit to men, an injustice already well-established in many countries” (Taylor, 2013). When the local church teaches that everyone is saved through Christ, but women may not teach others about this Salvation, this message of limited Salvation is spread across the world. The Bible was written for much more than just traditional American culture; it was written to save and free the world. The freedom that comes with equality is one of many freedoms denied women in foreign cultures. The Church validates the atrocities caused by gender inequality in these cultures when they teach that only men may profess the Gospel. If the Stone Campbell Movement would give up the comfort they find in keeping traditions, more could be done to spread God’s message of love and freedom to the women of the world who have no other hope of receiving humane treatment.

This tradition is kept for comfort, but hurts those it suppresses. According to U.S. Congregational Life Surveys, “The typical U.S. Congregation draws an adult crowd that is 61% female, 39% male. This gender gap shows up in all age categories” (U.S. Congregational Life Survey- key finding, 2003). On the average Sunday, 31 of 50 people are females. This means only 29 out of 50 people would be allowed to share God’s word in the church. This tradition is suppressing over half the church and keeping silent over half of the workers God desires to use.

As author Sarah Bessey would explain it, “It’s dangerous to cherry-pick a few stand-alone verses, particularly when they are used as a weapon to silence and intimidate, effectively benching half the church in midst of holy harvest season when the harvest is plentiful and the workers are few” (Bessey, 2013, pg.58). If the God of the universe decides to speak through women and use them as workers and leaders, then the church has no place to deny these chosen women that mission. This conversation matters because it hurts men and women, Christians and non-Christians, and also because it defies God’s commands and belittles women. If the Stone Campbell Movement treated people as equals, then the church could more effectively and more accurately share the message of Christ with men and women.

Allowing Women to Speak in Church

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus defied tradition in order to love people. From healing on the Sabbath to associating with sinners and Gentiles, Jesus tore down social boundaries in order to prioritize the individual (Matthew 12:9-14, 9:10-14). Whenever he was presented with an opportunity to demonstrate his love for an individual, knowing tradition would forbid him from doing so, Jesus would break tradition and prioritize the person. The traditions and “rules” of a denomination have never been more important to God than the individuals God created. When the church has traditions that keep people from loving others, their priorities are out of line. Jesus established the greatest commandments as love God, then love others (Matthew 22:37-40). We can’t love others and put boundaries on how God uses them. If we do not love how God created someone, we do not really love who they are. God is renowned for using unexpected people throughout the Bible: Moses was a murderer, Ruth was a Gentile, Joseph was a slave, Rahab was a prostitute, Samson was a sex offender, Mary was a virgin, and to the world, Jesus appeared as a nobody from the wrong part of the country. God will speak to his people

through whomever God desires; that is apparent throughout history. It is time for the church to encourage God's chosen people to follow God's design for their lives by allowing them to speak... even if they are women.

The Stone Campbell Movement needs to decide what they are going to follow: the example set by Christ or the practices of generations. In Matthew 6:24, the Bible describes how we can only serve one master, or we will end up hating the other. Matthew uses this to talk about money, but the same principle applies to tradition. If over time traditions stop reflecting God's commands, then it must be decided if the church will serve God or continue doing what they have always done. The church can only serve one master: God or tradition. Choosing tradition causes the church to remain in the same pitfalls as the Pharisees. By focusing outwardly and loving people for who they are, the church can teach people about the God they serve. However, if they stop there and discriminate against certain types of people by limiting how they can serve God, then they place limits on the churches love and God's ability to use people. The Stone Campbell Movement must stop allowing traditions to dictate what they allow people to do and start supporting women who God designed to speak. It is not easy to stop doing something that's always been done, but "just because it's what's done, doesn't mean it's what should be done" (Branagh, 2015). In order to better love and serve God, the church must first start loving and serving others. Until they allow women to speak, they are no better than the cultures of the world who discriminate against people simply because of how God created them. If the people of the church recognized this and desired to change it, the rest would be easy. Love God, love others. When the church truly loves others for who God created them to be, gender will not matter; the church will simply want people to follow God's call on their lives. When the church loves others by encouraging them to serve God, they end up serving God in the process.

Conclusion

When my sister came home from church telling the rest of us children that girls would no longer be allowed to pray in her class, this simple tradition changed the way God viewed women in my young mind. Suddenly, instead of being fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14), I would have been of greater use to God as a boy. Instead of being a child whose faith was to be desired by men (Matthew 18:3), I was merely a silenced girl not worthy of being heard. When we teach that women must remain silent, we do not just tell them to be quiet, we detract from the value God gave them. We remove their ability to praise God with their voices in congregational worship. We separate them from God and make man their only access point to him while in places of worship. I wish I had known then, and girls would be taught now, that this tradition and the discrepancies that come with it, are not Biblical, but only man-made decrees.

The tradition of silencing women, while non-Biblical and un-doctrinal, remains in many congregations of the Stone Campbell Movement. This tradition is not a Biblical act and isolates over half of the church; it keeps the talents and abilities of women buried and unused in furthering the kingdom of God. The belittling of women and restraining of God must be stopped in order for the Stone Campbell Movement with its ideals of inclusivity to flourish. In Genesis 5:2, after God created Adam and Eve, God did not position Adam as ruler of Eve because he was created first, but instead gave them a name together. God named them human (Genesis 5:2). In that moment, there was no man or woman, no leader or follower. They were both just humans, children equally loved and commissioned by God, neither designed to rule over the other, but instead told to love each other and obey their one true ruler, God. Throughout the Bible, God

continually uses willing humans as workers, not just men or just women. God, the giver of life and purpose, gave some humans (men and women) the gift of speaking and teaching, as well as the purpose in life to do these things. If the church will not recognize the authority of God and submit to it by allowing all chosen humans to speak and teach as they are divinely commanded to do, then the church stands in defiance of God. The traditions that man has made cannot overpower the commands of God. Even Jesus demonstrated this by continually opposing the religious leaders and their traditions in order to love and care for people. The Stone Campbell Movement must put aside tradition in order to follow God by allowing chosen women to use their God given gifts of teaching and speaking.

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