Are Women Permitted To Speak in the Assembly?

“Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church” (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35).

In examining the command in 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 for women to keep silent in the churches, we should first consider the phrase “as in all the churches” at the end of verse 33. Should it go with verse 33 or 34? F. W. Grosheide made a good observation:

> Since the words of vs. 33a refuse to take any further qualification, the clause: as in all the churches cannot be taken with the preceding, as some have tried to do. Taken with what follows the words are an appropriate reminder that this commandment is not given to the Corinthians alone but to all the churches (cf. 7:17).¹

The following has become an important question: “Are women permitted to speak when the whole congregation of God’s people come together?” Paul wrote, “Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says” (1 Corinthians 14:34).

Many scholars think that in this passage Paul was forbidding women to speak in the general assembly. Others do not believe that it always applies to women speaking in the general assembly, but think it applied in that setting under certain circumstances. Still others think that it applied to women in the first-century church but does not apply now.

**DID PAUL CONTRADICT HIMSELF?**

Some think that Paul contradicted himself in 1 Corinthians 11:2–17 and 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35. Various efforts have been made to resolve this seeming conflict in his teaching. A contradiction need not be assumed if other reasonable explanations can be given. If the only place women could pray or prophesy was in the general assembly of the church, then Paul might have contradicted himself. However, women could have prayed and prophesied in many other circumstances. The fact that women gathered for religious purposes at Philippi (Acts 16:13) may be an indication that this was a common practice among Christian women also. The ruling of 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 applied only when “the whole church should assemble together” (1 Corinthians 14:23), while 1 Corinthians 11:5 probably applied to occasions other than the general assembly of the church.

**THE WHOLE CHURCH**

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul was seeking to relieve the general assembly of confusion so that

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the church could be edified (vv. 4, 5, 12, 19). Confusion may have been developing in the assembly because of various disruptive practices that were taking place. (1) Languages were being spoken miraculously without an interpreter present (1 Corinthians 14:23). (2) More than one prophet was speaking at a time (1 Corinthians 14:27). (3) Women were speaking in the assembly, and may have been interrupting to ask questions of the men who were prophesying (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35).

In order to correct this situation, Paul addressed each group. Those who spoke in tongues were to speak one at a time, and only if they had an interpreter (1 Corinthians 14:27, 28). Prophets were also to speak one at a time, and others were to judge what they said (1 Corinthians 14:29–31). Women were to keep silent (1 Corinthians 14:34), because it was “improper for a woman to speak in church” (1 Corinthians 14:35).

In order to understand the injunction for women, four basic principles must be understood. First, this ruling applied if the “whole church” was assembled (1 Corinthians 14:23), so it did not apply when the whole church was not assembled. Since Paul was not writing about a Bible class arrangement, this ruling probably would not apply to a class situation. To apply this verse to a Bible class where the whole church is not gathered together is to apply it to a setting which was not being considered by Paul. We should not place restrictions on occasions not discussed in a passage.

Second, the meaning of “speak” should be determined by the setting in which it appears and should retain its primary meaning, unless the context indicates otherwise. “Speak” is the translation of lalein, meaning “speak” or “utter a sound.” This word appears 299 times in the New Testament and in most cases means “utter speech” or “speak.” The term appears twenty-four times in 1 Corinthians 14. The contextual meaning of lalein here, as in other New Testament passages, is that of uttering words or simply “speaking.” Those who spoke in “tongues” (Gk.: glossa; 1 Corinthians 14:2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 13, 14, 18, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27) were not babbling or uttering incoherent sounds. The tongue-speaker was miraculously speaking to the whole assembly (1 Corinthians 14:23) in a language unknown to him, a language he had not studied or learned.

The prophets, on the other hand, were speaking to the whole assembly in languages that were known to them (1 Corinthians 14:29). In the contextual setting of 1 Corinthians 14:34, lalein (“speak”) means to address the assembly with a message. In this setting “speak” refers to making a public speech, not to singing songs.

The nature of the speaking [lalein] and the being silent [sigao] is evident from the use of the same words in the preceding verses (27–30) about the speaking of tongue-speakers and prophets. The language there refers to the public speech used to address the assembly and the silence from ceasing from such speaking. 2

Third, the meaning of “keep silent” (Gk.: sigao; 1 Corinthians 14:34), “be silent” or “keep still,” is also important. For those who were miraculously speaking in another language, sigao (“keep silent”) meant they were to stop, or to refrain from, addressing the whole congregation (1 Corinthians 14:28). This instruction meant the same for a prophet who was speaking (1 Corinthians 14:30). Evidently, men could “speak” in the sense of asking questions of another who was speaking. At least, no restriction was placed on men with regard to asking questions of tongue-speakers or prophets. A prophet or tongue-speaker was to “keep silent,” or refrain from making a speech, while another was speaking. Therefore, in this section sigao meant to “keep silent” in the sense of not taking the floor in order to address the congregation. Paul applied this same restriction on women because “it is improper for a woman to speak [make a speech] in church” (1 Corinthians 14:35).

Fourth, if we are correct in our conclusion concerning “speak” and “keep silent,” Paul’s instruction to women was that they were not to take the floor to make a speech to the whole congregation, but were to refrain taking the floor to make a speech. This has nothing to do with women being a part of the congregational singing. In order to prevent interruptions of the speakers, Paul also stated that if women had any questions for those who were delivering inspired messages, they should ask their own husbands at home.

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OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This approach raises some important questions. (1) If Paul was basing this ruling on law and not on custom or culture, to what “law” was Paul appealing in verse 34? No injunction in the law of Moses forbade women to speak in public gatherings or addressed the subject of women being submissive in a worship setting.

Jesus used “your Law” to include the writings of the Old Testament, even when referring to statements not found in the law of Moses (John 10:34, in reference to Psalm 82:6; John 15:25, in reference to Psalm 35:19). Paul did the same when he referred to “the Law” in 1 Corinthians 14:21 and then quoted from Isaiah 28:11. Consequently, we do not have to look into the law given to Moses in order to find “the Law” Paul had in mind. Evidently, Paul alluded to Genesis 3:16: “And he shall rule over you.” In 1 Corinthians 14:35 Paul did not say that the Law told women to “be silent,” but stated that the Law commanded them to “be submissive.” He implied that being “silent” showed that they were being “submissive.”

(2) Which women was Paul writing about? The word γυναῖκες, plural of γυνή, translated “women” (1 Corinthians 14:34), can mean either “women” or “wives.” For this reason, some conclude that in this passage Paul was forbidding the wives of the prophets to interrupt their husbands. This is a possibility; however, had Paul meant the wives of the prophets, the natural way to express this would have been to state that “their” wives, the prophets’ wives, are to keep silent. Paul used no pronoun, which probably indicates that he meant women in general and not “their” wives, the wives of the prophets. Also, the original Greek contains no article in his second reference to women (“... for it is improper for a woman to speak in church”; 1 Corinthians 14:35), which would indicate that women in general were under consideration. Surely, he was not limiting this injunction to prophets’ wives, saying that it was improper for the wives of prophets to speak in church but all other women could speak.

(3) Who are the husbands? The word ἄνδρας, plural of ἀνήρ, can mean “men” or “husbands.” The use of the pronoun ᾿ιδίους (“own”) indicates that the women were to ask their “own men,” an expression that usually indicated husbands, but could in this setting include husbands or men in general. The fact that marriages usually occurred very early in life meant that most single girls were very young. Unmarried girls may not have been considered by Paul because they naturally would respect the discussions of the older people and would, because of their youth, remain silent. The implication for them would be that if they wanted to ask questions, they should follow the principle that applied to married women and ask their questions of men in a private setting.

A husband might be a prophet, or he could speak to a prophet to find out the answer to a question and then explain it to the wife at home. Since God’s complete revelation had not been recorded, many questions were likely to arise. Now, by reading the New Testament, women and men alike can find answers from the prophets without needing to ask questions of the prophets directly.

Paul did not address the situation in which the wife was a Christian and the husband was not. She might conclude that Paul’s instruction meant for her, like a single woman, to seek answers from a prophet in private, and not in the general assembly of the congregation.

(4) What does “at home” mean? Does this imply that the only place a woman can ask a question is in the privacy of her own home? “At home” in this context may not be any more restrictive than “at home” in 1 Corinthians 11:34: “If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, ...” If “at home” is restrictive to only one’s own home in that context, then Christians cannot eat in a restaurant, a park, or any place but at home.

A father may say to his son who wants to read a book during a worship service, “Son, you can read that book at home.” He is not saying that his son cannot read the book outside the home, but that the book can be more appropriately read some other place than in church. In like manner, Paul probably meant “at home” to be understood as somewhere outside the general assembly of the whole church. If so, the classroom would qualify as an “at home” setting.

First Corinthians clearly teaches that men had the right to make speeches and ask questions in the general assembly, but that the women did not have that right. This ruling would
apply whether the women being referred to were wives of the prophets or women in general, for it is “improper for a woman to speak in church” (14:35).

(5) What is the meaning of “improper”? The word is aischron, implying “shame” (1 Corinthians 14:35; also in 1 Corinthians 11:6; Ephesians 5:12). The Danker-Bauer Greek-English Lexicon defines it as “disgraceful.” If a woman should speak in the assembly she would be speaking out of place and thus would be engaging in a disgraceful act.

THE SETTING OF EXERCISING GIFTS

Because Paul had discussed spiritual gifts in the preceding section of 1 Corinthians 14, some have concluded that this injunction applied only when spiritual gifts were being exercised. F. W. Grosheide addressed this idea:

Another objection has been that 14:34 should not be detached from its context and that this context discusses glossolalia and prophecy and how to use those charismata. Women, it is then alleged, are forbidden to enter into such discussions during these services. But this interpretation is too far-fetched, for Paul speaks in very general terms and does not think of the Corinthian conditions alone (as in all the churches, for it is shameful, etc.).

Why would women need to be silent in such a setting and be permitted to speak when gifts were not being exercised? It would seem that the time for gifted women to use their gifts would be those times when gifts were being exercised. Paul was addressing different groups: tongue speakers, prophets, and then women in the general assembly (1 Corinthians 14:23–35).

CONCLUSION

Women were forbidden to take the floor to address the whole church. In such a setting they were not “permitted to speak,” that is, to make a speech or ask a question (1 Corinthians 14:34). To take center stage would show a lack of submission. For this reason, it was disgraceful for women to address the congregation. In order to avoid any implications of having a place of authority in the general assembly, women were to ask questions in a private setting.

The Christian woman has opportunities to speak the Word of the Lord 168 hours of a week—but not the three hours or so when the church convenes as a whole. In some cases, she has more contacts and more opportunities than men. God expects her to use the hours when she can speak to spread the wonderful words of life. By speaking up when these opportunities arise, she can glorify God and influence many people to follow Jesus.

Can a Woman Translate In the Assembly?

When a man addresses an assembly and a woman translates, she is not the one addressing the assembly. She is only the “mouthpiece” for the one making the address. The message she translates is not considered her message any more than the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, and Jude are considered to be the writings of Bible translators. A female translator is not giving her message and has not taken a place of authority, but remains under authority, unless she speaks where the speaker has not spoken. The Bible remains God’s Word when translated into different languages; likewise, a gospel message is delivered by the preacher, though it is translated or transcribed for the deaf or others by someone else.

Paul did not state concerning the one speaking in another language, “If there is no male interpreter present, let him keep silent in the church.” The woman did not have the right to give an address on her own, but no prohibition is given concerning translation. The restriction of silence on her part included addressing the assembly and asking questions, but it did not include her interpreting. If God had said, “The men are to translate,” then women would have been excluded; but God made no choice. Dare we make restrictions where God has made none?

4Grosheide, 342.