

Should a Woman Speak in Bible Class?

Whe issue of a woman's role in the local church has always been the topic of much discussion among God's people. As the world continues to abandon a respect for the authority of God's word on this issue, it is even more important for Christians to examine our own practices to make certain that they conform to what the Lord commands.

Historically there has been general agreement among churches of Christ in America that a woman is restricted from speaking in the church assembly. Unfortunately, there has not been universal agreement on the question of whether or not a woman can speak in Bible classes. If the Lord would have us to work together in "the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10), we should strive to attain unity on this issue as well.

Speech Restrictions and Their Context

Three passages outline the restriction of a woman's speech and the context in which these restrictions apply. The first comes in a large section in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians addressing behavior in the assembly. Starting in chapter eleven Paul addresses first the issue of the head covering (11:1-16), then the abuse of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34) and then the use of miraculous spiritual gifts in the assembly (12:1-14:40). Within the context of this last section Paul commands: **"Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church"** (1 Corinthians 14:34-35 NKJV).

The second, is more general in nature and comes in Paul's first letter to Timothy. After instructing all men to maintain a prayerful life (I Timothy 2:1-8) and women to behave modestly (I Timothy 2:9-10) Paul commands: **"Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence"** (1 Timothy 2:11,12). Many translations bring out the fact that the word used here is not as strong as the restriction in the previous text, but refers to "quietness" (ASV, NIV, YLT) or behaving "quietly" (NASB).

The third is actually the historical account of the conversion of Apollos in the book of Acts. Apollos, who knew only the teaching of John the Baptist, was teaching in the synagogue at Ephesus. The Christian couple Aquila and Priscilla heard him and afterwards took him aside and **"explained to him the way of God more accurately"** (Acts 18:26). The Greek text indicates clearly that both Aquila and Priscilla spoke with Apollos. Literally "they took him aside and they explained to him."

From these three accounts we can conclude that a woman is to be absolutely silent "in the church." At all times she is to maintain a quiet disposition. She is not to teach or exercise authority over a man in spiritual matters. Yet, in contexts outside of the church she can discuss spiritual matters with men, other than her husband.

When Are We "In the Church?"

The Greek word *ekklesia*, which is generally translated "church," is used in at least three distinct ways in the New Testament. First, it is used of the church universally. This is not a single congregation but all of God's people, everywhere. This is what Jesus said He would build (Matthew 16:18). This involves those whose names are registered in heaven (Hebrews 12:23). This is what the Lord adds one to when he or she obeys the gospel (Acts 2:47). A person is "in" the church in this sense as long as he or she lives in faithful obedience to the gospel. The Lord does not teach that a woman is to remain silent from the time she is added to the church universal.

Second, the word church is used of a local congregation of Christians. We find reference to the "church

in Cenchrea” (Romans 16:1) or the “church of the Laodiceans” (Colossians 4:16). It is over the church in this sense of the word that a local congregation appoints elders (Titus 1:5). It is with a local church that faithful Christians identify themselves. As long as a person continues to work with a local church they could be said to be “in” a specific church in that sense. Yet the Lord is not teaching a woman that she must be silent from the moment she identifies with a local congregation.

Third, the word is used of a local congregation actually assembled. While this refers to the same people who are a part of a local congregation it refers to them when they have actually come together “as a church.” It is before the church in this sense that the unrepentant sinner is to be brought when other efforts to bring about restoration have failed (Matthew 18:17). It is within the church in this sense that Paul teaches the value of speaking clear words as opposed to unintelligible tongues (1 Corinthians 14:19). Paul rebukes the Corinthians’ abuse of the Lord’s Supper because they had not come together for the proper purpose when they came together “as a church” (1 Corinthians 11:18). A person is “in the church” in this sense only when he or she is actually assembled with a local congregation which has come together “as a church.” It is in this context, that the Lord teaches a woman to be absolutely silent.

There are many situations when members of a local congregation may do things together but they are not acting or assembling as a church. We might go fishing or shopping and yet we are not doing so as a church. When a congregation decides to offer separate classes for all ages (at the place of assembly or in other places) the individuals involved are not acting “as a church” in that the church is not all assembled together. Could the entire congregation do something without acting “as a church?” Certainly. In small congregations of two to three families it is not unusual at all for every member of the congregation to go camping together, or engage in business together, but the members are not camping or doing business “as a church.” The same is true in large classes where virtually all of the congregation has come together but the meeting is not intended to constitute the church assembled.

This is much like the way that our government operates with respect to the Congress. Representatives are elected to serve in congress. During their entire term they are considered “in congress,” (in one sense), but the same rules that govern their speech or behavior when congress is assembled “in congress” do not apply to their speech and conduct at all times.

A Word of Caution

We have seen that the Bible authorizes women to speak in discussions of the Bible in situations outside of the church assembly. We have also seen that in such situations the Bible teaches that a woman is not to exercise authority over a man and is still to maintain a quiet disposition at all times. This makes it clear that in Bible classes of God’s people that are not understood to constitute the local church assembled, whether at a congregation’s meeting house or somewhere else, a woman is authorized to speak.

With that said, a word of caution is in order. When Paul gave instructions in First Corinthians eleven regarding the head covering, at least part of the issue seems to have been avoiding anything that would communicate a lack of submission to male authority in the church to a stranger visiting the assembly (I Corinthians 11:10). Sometimes we may not be as clear as we ought to be when it is our intention to assemble together as a church and when we are not. some years ago I attended a congregation that had Sunday night “worship services” posted on their sign. Everything about the assembly gave the impression that the congregation was meeting together as a church to worship. When the time came for the lesson, the speaker got up in the pulpit and presented a lecture on a Biblically related historical topic. After the lesson he then asked if there were any questions. Two women raised their hands and offered questions. If I had known nothing about the saints that worshiped there it would have been my impression that this congregation disregarded the the Bible’s restrictions regarding a women’s speech in the assembly. In their case, I know that this particular congregation varies what they do on Sunday evenings. Sometimes they will have a singing other times a night of prayer, and other nights a Bible class. A congregation certainly has the right to make such

choices for itself. At the same time we should be very careful that we don't communicate something which we do not intend to communicate. If they had said "tonight we are having a Bible class," it might have avoided the wrong impression.

We should note that the determining factor is not what is done (i.e. worship vs. Bible study) but the context in which it is done (i.e. "in the church (assembly)" vs. outside of the church assembly). This is often distinguished simply by a declaration of the intention of the gathering. The church could have a "Bible class" as a church, and the speech restrictions would apply. First Corinthians fourteen describes an assembly in which different men spoke at different times. If a prophecy came to one seated the man was to indicate this and offer his comments (I Corinthians 14:29-31). It is within this context that a woman was told to keep silent.

When we take steps in a particular direction we often set an example and a precedent that will be followed and expanded upon by the generations that will follow us. Just because we may technically have a right to do something, that doesn't mean that we give no consideration to how our actions appear to others. If we are not very clear regarding our intentions we will find ourselves crossing a line that becomes impossible to defend and even harder to retreat from.

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