

Catherine Booth: A Woman's Right to Preach

How is it that women would venture to preach when female ministry is forbidden in the Word of God?

This is a serious objection to consider and, if capable of substantiation, would receive my immediate and cheerful acquiescence; but I think I can show, by a fair and consistent interpretation, that the very opposite view is the truth—that the public ministry of women is absolutely enjoined by both precept and example in the Word of God.

First, I will refer to the most prominent and explicit passages of the New Testament referring to the subject, beginning with 1 Corinthians 11:4-5: “Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven” (KJV).

A talented writer says: “The character of the prophesying here referred to by the Apostle is defined in 1 Corinthians 14:3-4 and 31. The reader will see that it was directed to the edification, exhortation and comfort of believers, and the result anticipated was the conviction of unbelievers and unlearned persons.

“Such were the public services of women which the Apostle allowed, and such was the ministry of females predicted by the prophet Joel and described as a leading feature of the gospel dispensation. Women who speak in assemblies for worship under the influence of the Holy Spirit assumed thereby no personal authority over others; they simply deliver the messages of the gospel, which imply obedience, subjection and responsibility, rather than authority and power.”

Dr. A. Clarke says on this verse: "Whatever may be the meaning of praying and prophesying in respect to the man, they have precisely the same meaning in respect to the woman. So that some women at least, as well as some men, might speak to others to edification, exhortation and comfort.

"And this kind of prophesying or teaching was predicted by Joel (2:28) and referred to by Peter (Acts 2:17). And had there not been such gifts bestowed on woman, the prophecy could not have had its fulfillment. The only difference marked by the Apostle was that the man had his head uncovered, because he was the representative of Christ; the woman had hers covered, because she was placed by the order of God in subject to the man and because it was the custom among both Greeks and Romans, and an express law among the Jews, that no woman should be seen abroad without a veil."

I think this view is the only fair and commonsense interpretation of the 1 Corinthians 11 passage. If Paul is not here acknowledging the fact that women did actually pray and prophesy in the primitive church, his language has no meaning at all; and if he is not acknowledging their right to do so by dictating the proprieties of their appearance while so engaged, we leave to objectors the task of making any sense whatever from his language.

If, according to the logic of some protestors, the apostle here, in arguing against an improper and indecorous mode of performance, forbids the performance itself, the prohibition extends to the men as well as to the women; for Paul as expressly reprehends a man's praying with his head covered as he does a woman's praying with hers uncovered. With just as much force these protestors might assert that, in reproofing the same church for their improper celebration of the Lord's Supper (see 1 Cor. 11:20-21), Paul prohibits all Christians, in every age, from celebrating it at all.

The question with the Corinthians was not whether or not the

woman should pray or prophesy at all (that question had been settled on the day of Pentecost), but whether, as a matter of convenience, they could do so without their veils. The Apostle kindly and clearly explains that by the law of nature and society it would be improper for a woman to uncover her head while engaged in acts of public worship.

A lawyer writing on the above passage says, "Paul here takes for granted that women were in the habit of praying and prophesying; he expresses no surprise nor utters a syllable of censure; he was only anxious that they should not provoke unnecessary obloquy by laying aside their customary head-dress or departing from the dress which was indicative of modesty in the country in which they lived.

"This passage seems to prove beyond the possibility of dispute that in the early times women were permitted to speak to the 'edification and comfort' of Christians, and that the Lord graciously endowed them with grace and gifts for this service. What He did then, may He not be doing now?

"It seems truly astonishing that Bible students, with the second chapter of Acts before them, should not see that an imperative decree has gone forth from God, the execution of which women cannot escape; whether they like or not, they 'shall' prophesy throughout the whole course of this dispensation; and they have been doing so, though they and their blessed labours are not much noticed."

Let the Women Keep Silent

Our objecting friends would point us to what Paul says in another place: "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Cor. 14:34-35).

Now let it be borne in mind that this is the same apostle, writing to the same church, as in the above instance. Will anyone maintain that Paul here refers to the same kind of speaking as before? If so, we insist on his supplying us with some rule of interpretation which will harmonize this unparalleled contradiction and absurdity. Taking the simple and commonsense view of the two passages—that one refers to the devotional and religious exercises in the church and the other to the inconvenient asking of questions and imprudent or ignorant talking—there is no contradiction or discrepancy.

If on the other hand we assume that the apostle refers in both instances to the same thing, we make him in one page give the most explicit directions how a thing shall be performed and in a page or two further on, and writing to the same church, expressly forbid its being performed at all. We admit “it is a shame for women to speak in the church” in the sense here intended by the apostle; but before the argument based on these words can be deemed of any worth, objectors must prove that the “speaking” here is synonymous with that to which the apostle refers in 1 Corinthians 11.

Dr. Clarke says on this passage: “According to the prediction of Joel, the Spirit of God was to be poured out on the women as well as the men, that they might prophesy, that is, teach. And that they did prophesy or teach is evident from what the Apostle says (1 Corinthians 11) where he lays down rules to regulate this part of their conduct while ministering in the church.

“All that the Apostle opposes here is their questioning, finding fault, disputing, etc., in the Christian church, as the Jewish men were permitted to do in their synagogues (see Luke 2:46); together with attempts to usurp authority over men by setting up their judgment in opposition to them; for the Apostle has reference to acts of disobedience and arrogance of which no woman would be guilty who was under the influence of the Spirit of God.”

If anyone still insists on a literal application of this text, I ask how he disposes of the preceding part of the chapter where it occurs. Surely, if one verse is so authoritative and binding, the whole chapter (1 Cor. 14) is equally so. Therefore those who insist on a literal application of the words of Paul, under all circumstances and through all time, will be careful to observe the Apostle's order of worship in their own congregation.

But where is the minister who lets his whole church prophesy one by one while he sits still and listens, so that all things may be done decently and in order (see 1 Cor. 14:31,40)? Paul as expressly lays down this order as he does the rule for women, and he adds, "The things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord" (v. 37).

Why then don't ministers abide by these directives? We anticipate their reply: "Because these directives were given to the Corinthians as temporary arrangements, and though they were the commandments of the Lord to them at that time they do not apply to all Christians in all times."

If ministers believe that, then their argument for the prohibition of women's speaking is null and void, since it is among the same directives as the one on allowing the whole church to prophesy and was also given to the Corinthians only. So until learned divines make a personal application of the rest of the chapter they must excuse us for declining to do so of the 24th verse.

I Suffer Not a Woman to Teach

Another passage frequently cited as prohibitory of female labor in the church is 1 Timothy 2:12-13: "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. Though we have never met with the slightest proof that this text has any reference to the public exercises of women, nevertheless, as it is often quoted, I will give it fair examination.

"It is primarily an injunction respecting her personal behavior at home," the Rev. J. H. Robinson says. "It stands in connection with precepts respecting her apparel and her domestic position; especially her relation to her husband. No one will suppose that the Apostle forbids a women to 'teach' absolutely and universally. Even objectors would allow her to teach her servants and children and, perhaps, her husband too.

"If he were ignorant of the Saviour, might she not teach him the way of Christ? If she were acquainted with languages, arts or sciences, which he did not know, might she not teach him these things? Certainly she might!

"The 'teaching,' therefore, which is forbidden by the Apostle is not every kind of teaching any more than, in the previous instance, his prohibition of speaking applied to every kind of speaking in the church; but it is such teaching as is domineering, and as involves the usurpation of authority over the man. This is the only teaching forbidden by St. Paul in the passage under consideration."

A lawyer writing on the same subject says: "This prohibition refers exclusively to the private life and domestic character of woman and simply means that an ignorant or unruly woman is not to force her opinions on the man whether he will or no. It has no reference whatever to good women living in obedience to God and their husbands, or to women sent out to preach the gospel by the call of the Holy Spirit."

If the context is allowed to fix the meaning of this text, as it would be in any other, there can be no doubt that the above is the only consistent interpretation; and if it is, then this prohibition has no bearing whatever on the religious exercises of women led and taught by the Spirit of God.

Whether the church will allow women to speak in her assemblies can be only a question of time. Then, when the true light shines and God's works take the place of man's traditions, the

doctor of divinity who teaches that Paul commands woman to be silent when God's Spirit urges her to speak will be regarded much the same as we would regard an astronomer who taught that the sun is the earth's satellite. And his false claims would be overridden by the truth: the undeniable scriptural evidence for a woman's right to preach.

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