

Women's Silence in the Church: Relevant Quotations

Dr. Jim Renihan's Description of How the English Particular Baptists Dealt with This Topic:

"The Baptists considered the Scriptural prohibitions on women speaking in public worship to be in full force. They were not permitted to pray, prophesy, publicly teach, rule, or 'speake ... by way of passing sentence' in doctrinal or discipline cases. But the prohibitions were not absolute. The Abingdon Association determined that a woman might speak in three cases, to apply for membership in a church by giving her profession of faith, to be a witness or participant in discipline cases, and to express repentance if she had been disciplined. It will be noted that none of these cases are related to public worship, but to church business meetings.

"In December 1694, the Maze Pond, London, church was troubled by a dispute over the 'duty and Liberty of the Sisters respecting their Silence and Speaking in the church'. After discussion, it was unanimously agreed that the women could not pray, preach, give thanks or exercise any spiritual gift in the church; could not hold church office; and could not engage in debate in the church 'equally as the men have power to doe'. But they were permitted to vote by raising their hands, and speak concerns with regard to a matter for vote upon approval by the church body. [Footnote 55: "Maze Pond *CMB*, 109. This was an anti-singing church, the nucleus of which had separated from Keach's assembly when he introduced singing into worship."]

"One of the objections leveled against hymn singing was that it of necessity overturned the restriction on women speaking in public worship. Benjamin Keach responded with a lengthy quote from John Cotton who confirmed that a woman was not to teach, but could verbally participate in two ways, by giving an account of her offense as did Sapphira in Acts 5.8, and in singing 'for 'tis evident the Apostle layeth no greater restraint upon Women for silence in the Church, than the Law put upon them before, for so himself speaketh in ... 1 Cor. 14:34'. Since the 'Law' (understood as the Old Testament) permitted women to sing (e.g., Miriam), the apostolic churches must also have permitted the women to sing. In his *An Answer to Mr. Marlow's Appendix*, Keach expands his position. "Tis a hard case that Women should be debarred to speak in any sense, or any ways to Break Silence in the Church'. If the prohibition is absolute, a woman could not inquire into the well-being of another church member 'when in the Congregation', could not ask 'where the Text is' if she comes in late, could not respond to prayer with a verbal 'Amen', and could not give an account of her Christian experience. The prohibition on speaking enjoins women from 'Ministration of preaching the Gospel, or ministerially, or authoritatively to preach the Word'. It does not hinder other carefully delineated forms of verbal participation. [Footnote 58: "Keach, *Answer to Marlow*, 34. Even this is not an absolute prohibition. Keach cites 'our late Annotators' on 1 Cor. 14.34 who state that 'this Rule must be restrained to ordinary prophesyings [ordinary preaching], for certainly, if the Spirit of prophecy came upon a woman in the church, she might speak', 36; Cf. Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 3 (McLean, Va.: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.), 591. Neither Keach nor Poole advocates continuing revelation. They simply use the presence of such

activities, *in the apostolic era*, as examples to demonstrate that the prohibitions were not absolute.”]

“To summarize, women were not allowed to exercise any kind of authoritative verbal communication in the churches. Some permitted limited participation in church business meetings, and others allowed women to sing with the congregation, speak the amen at the end of prayer, and engage in personal fellowship.” – James M. Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675–1705*, p. 130–131

Matthew Henry’s Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35:

“Here the apostle, 1. Enjoins silence on their women in public assemblies, and to such a degree that they must not ask questions for their own information in the church, but ask their husbands at home. *They are to learn in silence with all subjection; but, says the apostle, I suffer them not to teach*, 1 Tim. ii. 11, 12. There is indeed an intimation (*ch. xi. 5*) as if the women sometimes did pray and prophecy in their assemblies, which the apostle, in that passage, does not simply condemn, but the manner of performance, that is, praying or prophesying with the head uncovered, which, in that age and country, was throwing off the distinction of sexes, and setting themselves on a level with the men. But here he seems to forbid all public performances of theirs. They are not permitted to speak (*v. 34*) in the church, neither in praying nor prophesying. The connection seems plainly to include the latter, in the limited sense in which it is taken in this chapter, namely, for preaching, or interpreting scripture by inspiration. And, indeed, for a woman to prophesy in this sense were to teach, which does not so well befit her state of subjection. A teacher of others has in that respect a superiority over them, which is not allowed the woman over the man, nor must she therefore be allowed to teach in a congregation: *I suffer them not to teach*. But praying, and uttering hymns inspired, were not teaching. And seeing there were women who had spiritual gifts of this sort in that age of the church (see Acts xxii. 9), and might be under this impulse in the assembly, must they altogether suppress it? Or why should they have this gift, if it must never be publicly exercised? For these reasons, some think that these general prohibitions are only to be understood in common cases; but that upon extraordinary occasions, when women were under a divine *afflatus*, and known to be so, they might have liberty of speech. They were not ordinarily to teach, nor so much as to debate and ask questions in the church, but learn in silence there; and, if difficulties occurred, *ask their own husbands at home....* We have here the reason of this injunction: It is God's law and commandment that they should be under obedience (*v. 34*); they are placed in subordination to the man, and it is a shame for them to do any thing that looks like an affectation of changing ranks, which speaking in public seemed to imply, at least in that age, and among that people, as would public teaching much more: so that the apostle concludes it was a shame for women to speak in the church, in the assembly.” – *Matthew Henry’s Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible*, text prepared from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed on stepbible.org

Dr. Sam Waldron's Distinction between Women in Corporate Worship and Women in Other Church Contexts:

[Regarding 1 Corinthians 14:34–35:] “It is very clear that Paul means in verses 34–35 to forbid female tongues-speakers and prophetesses from exercising their gifts in the church. Now the implication is immediate and important. We know that there were female tongues-speakers and female prophets in the early church. Clearly, they exercised their gifts in public somehow and somewhere. Compare 1 Corinthians 11:5; Acts 2:17; 21:9. Paul’s point here is to forbid the exercise of those gifts in the church. By implication and context, he also has in mind and forbids teaching by women in other ways than through tongues or prophecy....

“There is a special prohibition of the prophesying and tongues-speaking of women within the meetings of the church which does not apply in other public situations. This is why I personally am comfortable, though it may seem odd to some, with having women read Scripture and pray in small groups and Sunday School, but am unable to approve of them doing the same thing in the church. This command in 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 regulates women in church, but not in other places.

“Of course, there are broader principles which should govern the conduct of women even outside the church. It seems clear to me, for instance, that women should not be placed in a formal teaching position over men by the church even in Sunday School classes, small groups, or informal Bible studies. But all this should not be allowed to obscure the plain fact that women could prophesy and speak in tongues publicly, but were not allowed to do so in the church.” – Sam Waldron, *How Then Should We Worship? The Regulative Principle and Required Parts of the Church's Corporate Worship*, p. 332–333