

Women Speaking in Churches

I am very proud to be a part of the great American Restoration movement, because I have found no other fellowship of Christians that is closer to authentic good news of Christ. From its very beginning the goal of that noble cause has been to promote unity based solely upon the authority of the word of God, and I rejoice because much unity in truth has been achieved.

However, we have not been unaffected by the many forces at work around us. New satanic forces have arisen which are increasing disobedience and division. One of the most successful of these diabolical forces is the feminist movement, which has become deeply rooted in many hearts. I have already posted two essays on my Web site in an attempt to combat this evil ideology: *Feminism*, and, *The Holy Bible: A Masculine Book*.

I am adding this one in response to arguments presented by the late Guy N. Woods (a popular conservative Christian preacher and scholar among the Churches of Christ) which are being publicized to support practices in our churches that clearly violate some of God's commands for women. For example, an article was published in the October, 1995 issue of *Contending for the Faith* which listed many of those arguments. When I read that article it was the first time I had seen his material on the subject, although I had heard some of the arguments.

Now I have never had the privilege of meeting brother Woods, but were he alive today I would not hesitate to reprove him personally for what he taught, because what he taught about women's role in the churches is wrong. But since Church publications like *Contending for the Faith* are promoting his errors, I felt compelled to contend with those false teachings uttered by brother Woods.

It troubles me deeply to have to contend with my own brothers in Christ. How much more I would rather do battle with God's enemies than with his friends. Yet, our loyalty must be first and foremost to our beloved heavenly Father, and not first to ourselves. Therefore, how can I refuse to criticize somebody when he errs, no matter how much he is beloved by other men (see for example Galatians 2:11).

My brothers, I am not passing judgment upon the soul of our dear brother Woods or any other Christian. I am only trying to point out errors he made in his teaching about women. God is the judge of us all, and he will judge me for what I *do not do*, as well as for what

I do. I plead with you, as fellow disciples of Christ, to consider what I have written. If I am wrong, use the word of God to show me how and where I am wrong. I have written these words of criticism with love in my heart for brother Woods and for all of God's children.

It is my constant prayer that our unity in truth will grow, and that we be not further divided. But true unity can only come by strict obedience to God's commandments. And if I am rejected by even my own brothers because I am trying to be obedient to my Heavenly Father, then so be it. But how much better for us all to be united with each other through our loyal obedience to Christ.

Here then are the errors I have found in what brother Woods taught, as reprinted in that October issue:

First: We have no prophets today.

Brother Woods says this in order to dismiss some commands he says were limited only to prophets. However, although true in one sense, this is a misleading statement. It is somewhat equivalent to saying that we do not have the word of God today because none of the original manuscripts exist. Certainly there are no longer any men whose knowledge of the word of God is given by direct inspiration.

Yet, in another sense of the word we certainly do have prophets. For Thayer (one of the most renowned Greek lexicographers) includes the following meaning of the Greek word for prophet in his definition: "An interpreter or spokesman for God." In that sense any man today who interprets or proclaims the word of God is a prophet. It is only because of widespread misunderstanding about its different shades of meaning that the word *prophet* is rarely used in that sense anymore.

But to use popular misunderstanding about the meaning of a word as justification for an interpretation, is like saying that since modern dictionaries include sprinkling and pouring as baptism, then it is acceptable to do it that way.

Second: The rules set forth in I Corinthians 14 for the purpose of governing the meeting are not applicable to the church when it assembles today.

Claiming that prophets no longer exist, brother Woods says, "... hence, it is impossible to properly apply the rules governing the meeting of I Corinthians 14 to the assemblies characteristic of us today." He claims that because those early Christians possessed special spiritual gifts, "... a meeting of that type is, therefore, no longer held."

Although no man after those days has ever possessed any of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, Christians do possess other talents, and the pattern of worship Paul described in his first Corinthian letter should still be followed. Yet, brother Woods states that it "... would be impossible to apply them to the church in their original form today."

First, it certainly is possible for women to remain silent because they obeyed that command for centuries. Second, in the broader sense of the word, interpreters and spokesmen for God (prophets) do exist today, and so the following rule given in I Corinthians 14 can also be obeyed:

And let two or three spokesmen for God [prophets] speak, and let the other men pass judgment. But if it should be revealed to another man who is seated, let the first be silent. For ye can all proclaim the word of God [prophesy] one by one, so that all may learn, and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of spokesmen for God [prophets] are subject to spokesmen for God [prophets], for God is not a God of confusion, but of peace (1st Corinthians 14:29-33).

There are men today who interpret and act as spokesmen for God, and hence, in that sense, are prophets. If Paul was referring only to men who always received divine instructions directly, then why would there be the necessity for the others to judge? Thayer says the word for judge (*diakrinetosan*) transliterated means to "separate, make a distinction, discriminate, decide a dispute." What were the others to pass judgment on, if everything they said was by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit? Was the Holy Spirit unable to make himself understood without needing men to help him? Was the Holy Spirit less capable of making himself understood than men? Of course not.

Even during those ancient times when God gave direct revelations to men they had always been given occasionally, not continuously. Hence, there was the need for the others to judge what any one of them might say when not speaking an immediate revelation. In this more common situation those men were subject to the judgment of each other in order to confirm the accuracy of their words (I Corinthians 14:32).

This same pattern can work especially well in times like these when the special gift of prophetic utterance is no longer available. For example, in terms of knowing the word of God, a man who has received it by reading Holy Scripture is no different from a man who received it by direct inspiration. When

I proclaim the word of God from my memory or by reading the Bible, am I not then serving as a spokesman for God (I Corinthians 12:3)?

Hence, when I do this, other knowledgeable men of God must sit in judgment about what I say, to insure accuracy and reliability; especially when I try to explain and interpret its meaning, as I am doing now. Sadly, this pattern for proclaiming the word of God in the churches is rarely, if ever, practiced any longer. Church meetings are dominated by one man who consistently does all of the teaching/preaching. This is not the New Testament pattern, as clearly shown in I Corinthians 14. Although vehemently denied, the practice is modeled after the “priest/pastor” system of the denominational world.

Letting one man consistently control all teaching during the church meeting, as has been practiced in churches for centuries, is inferior for a number of reasons. First, it makes controlling all but the most blatant errors very difficult, and the other members often give up trying. Moreover, because the word of God is proclaimed almost exclusively by only one man, the congregation receives a one-sided perspective of Bible teaching. This may be one reason why many congregations frequently change their “preacher/minister”.

Furthermore, the practice is not conducive to the healthy growth and development of the men of the congregation. In such a situation, all other men become passive listeners. They, like the women, are bound to “keep silent”. This does not promote the development of God’s role for men as leaders. Hence, the practice of Christianity has become increasingly effeminate, and more appealing to women than to men. And well-trained leaders in the churches are becoming increasingly scarce.

It is a tragic mistake to always interpret Bible words, including the Greek word for prophet, in only one sense. Yet even if a man insists on believing that those men spoken about in I Corinthians 14 were only those who were always speaking directly from the Holy Spirit, does that justify saying that all the rules governing their meetings can be ignored today?

How can we dismiss the commandments of God because we cannot duplicate the exact conditions under which they were originally applied? Should we no longer obey the command to go into all the world and preach the gospel because we do not have the same miraculous powers possessed by the original Christians? Should we say that because we cannot confirm the

truth of our words by miraculous signs, then we are no longer bound to evangelize?

My brothers, carrying this logic to its final conclusion, it would be necessary to say that none of the commands given to the original churches need to be obeyed today. The truth is, Paul said nothing (nor implied nothing) to indicate that the meetings of the Corinthian Christians were special or unique, and that these were temporary rules. For when Paul gave his command about women's silence, he applied it to **“all the churches,”**¹ (I Corinthians 14:33). That rule was universal then, and it is universal today.

Brother Woods has wrongfully purged from the scriptures important commands of God when he argues that these were special meetings which, in his words, were conducted “at stated intervals,” and are “no longer held,” His argument is based upon pure speculation. Regarding these matters, Paul said, **“If a man presumes to be a prophet or spiritual, let**

-
1. Most people are unaware that ancient Greek writing did not include punctuation marks. Hence, we find a difference between English translations, about which sentence the phrase **“in all the churches”** of I Corinthians 14:33 should belong. The ASV makes more sense than the KJV. For to say that the qualification **“in all the churches”** belongs in the sentence, **“For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints”** (KJV), implies that although God is not the author of confusion in the churches, he may be the author of confusion elsewhere—an unreasonable implication.

Clearly the ASV gives the more accurate rendering when it places the qualification **“in all the churches”** in the sentence, **“As in all the churches of the saints, let the women keep silence in the churches...”** Yet, if any man insists upon using the KJV rendering of I Corinthians 14:33, and refuses to apply the phrase **“all the churches”** to the command for women to keep silence in the churches there stated, I make the following request of that man: If this restriction does *not* apply to all the churches, then where does the word of God say that? Where does it say that this restriction is limited to *some* of the churches, for *some* of the time, for *some* of the women? When it comes to direct commands, speculations will not do. Of such is the cause of the terrible division and blatant disobedience among those who claim allegiance to Christ today.

him acknowledge what I write to you, that they are commandments of Lord” (I Corinthians 14:37). Where did Paul ever say that these were special meetings held at stated intervals, which were for those times only? I have actually read arguments published by scholars who used exactly the same kind of reasoning to dismiss God’s command forbidding homosexuality. They wrote that homosexuality was forbidden in those days because the world population was too small, and thus, sexual intercourse for the purpose of having children was required. But today with the (so called) “population explosion” homosexuality is more desirable because no children can be produced. My brothers, do you not see where speculations claiming “it was for them and not for us” can lead?

Third: The command to keep silent was intended only for the wives of the prophets.

But Paul never said that. What he did say was,

As in all the churches of the sanctified, let the women keep silent in the churches. For it is not permitted for them to speak, but to be subordinate, as the law also says. And if they want to learn anything, let them question their own husbands at home, for it is an ugly thing for women to speak in an assembly. Or did the word of God come forth from you? Or did it come to you only? If any man presumes to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge what I write to you, that they are commandments of Lord. But if any man is ignorant, let him be ignorant (I Corinthians 14:34-38)

In the above quotation, Paul said, **“As in all the churches of the sanctified, let the women keep silent in the churches ... for it is an ugly thing for women to speak in an assembly.”** Paul applied this command to women in all the churches, and he said nothing about certain kinds of women or certain kinds of circumstances. I repeat, Paul said nothing to indicate that this command was not universal. Hence, it applied universally then, and must apply universally today as well. My brothers, if we are going to remain loyal to the restoration ideal, then we must accept the commands taught by Paul for the early churches, no matter how unpopular some of them may be in this adulterous generation.

Fourth: Brother Woods gives a reason why the women in Corinth were commanded to keep silent in church. He said, “...these women were not prophets, they thus had no ‘word of exhortation’ for the people.”

Based upon this statement, anybody would conclude that the only reason the women were to keep silent was because they did not have a “word of exhortation.” And so it logically follows that if any of the women present in the church did happen to be a prophet having a “word of exhortation,” she would have been freely allowed to speak before the congregation. That there were women prophets at that time cannot be denied, because earlier in that letter Paul said, **“But every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for it is one and the same thing as the woman who has been shaven”** (I Corinthians 11:5). Since Paul said there were women prophets, how could brother Woods have said the women present “were not prophets”? Did the women prophets always forsake the assemblies?

Women of all kinds, including prophets, have always been allowed to speak, but only at appropriate times, and not in the assembly of the sanctified. During those times when men are gathered together to worship God, and/or to discuss his Holy Word, women are commanded to keep their subservient role, and remain silent. Yet, in this disobedient age of feminism, women speak as freely as men in “all the churches” whenever they have something to say, including when they want to teach a lesson (usually, like almost all of the men, they teach from where they are seated), or even when they want to argue with a preacher or an elder, or even their own husbands. All of these things are common in “all the churches” these days. The only restrictions women now accept are the same ones which apply to the great majority of the men of the congregation: They refrain from speaking during the so called “formal” or “worship” part of the assembly (the distinction of which is, in fact, a modern tradition of men).

Fifth: Men were also commanded to keep silent.

This is another misleading statement. Nowhere in the Bible were men commanded in all the churches to keep silent, as were the women. Paul commanded that men were to refrain from speaking under certain conditions during the assembly; namely, when another man was speaking, or if no man could interpret what he was uttering in a “tongue”. The command for men to restrain their speech was never to be applied universally, as with the women, but only for the purpose of maintaining order, as Paul even added: **“...for God is not a God of confusion, but of peace”** (I Corinthians 14:33). This special restriction on men not to talk all at the same time, or to talk without being understood, is in no way equivalent to the feminine restriction.

God has commanded women to keep a subservient role in the homes, in the churches, and (ideally) in society as a whole. Did Paul ever even hint that if any man had a question during the assembly, that he was forbidden to speak, but must go home and ask his wife? Yet, that is exactly the pattern for women. It is incorrect to say (or imply) that men are no different from women regarding the command for silence in the churches.

Sixth: “Paul’s command for silence was absolute: the women could not utter a sound.

Since women are allowed to sing during the assembly, they are not silent. Therefore, the restriction was unique for that situation, and women today can speak freely.” Brother Woods interprets Paul’s command to say, in brother Woods’ words, it “...forbids women to lalien (the transliterated Greek word) in the church, utter a sound, emit a voice. It does not allow singing...” Perhaps, since brother Woods said the restriction was so severe she could not even “utter a sound”, then he would judge her guilty if she but sneezed. What Paul actually said to the Corinthian brothers was, **“As in all the churches of the sanctified, let the women keep silent in the churches. For it is not permitted for them to speak, but to be subordinate, as the law also says”** (I Corinthians 14:34).

May I again point out that Paul commanded silence **“in all the churches,”** making no qualifications whatever because of special circumstances. Moreover, Paul clearly explained what he meant by keeping silent: **“For it is not permitted for them to speak ...”** Thayer’s lexicon includes the following definition of lalien: “... to use words in order to declare one’s mind and disclose one’s thoughts; to speak ...” Although singing uses words, what man is there who does not understand the difference between singing and speaking? The word *speak* refers to speech, not singing.

The right to speak in a group is far different from the right to join the group in singing. Paul gave an example to reinforce what he meant, by stating that the women could not even ask questions. If even singing were forbidden, Paul would certainly have made that explicit. Moreover, Paul said the restriction was also a part of Jewish law, and Jewish women certainly sang at their assemblies (Ezra 2:65). How then could Paul’s command have been merely a temporary Christian ruling for a very special kind of meeting where gifts of the Holy Spirit were at work? Singing is the one way God has *not* forbidden women to utter words in the churches. They are

allowed to follow along with men¹ as they proclaim words through song. But having overextended Paul's restriction, brother Woods then uses this as further evidence to dismiss the command by saying, in effect, that it was for them and not for us. It is no less foolish to dismiss the command for women's silence in speech, than to forbid women to sing.

Seventh: A woman has the equal right to "instruct" or "set forth, declare, expound" the word of God to men.

That is my understanding of what brother Woods has said. But Paul strictly commanded that women were *not* to teach men: **"Let a woman learn in silence in all subjection. But I do not allow a woman to teach, nor to act autonomously from a man, but to be in quietness"** (1 Timothy 2:11-12). This command is as plain and forthright as the command for baptism (which many have also found reasons to dismiss). Just as with the command for silence, nowhere in the entire New Testament is there any qualification about the command that women are forbidden to teach men. (Surely, every man knows the difference between men and children).

Brother Woods says that although women are not allowed to "teach" men, she can "instruct" them. By any other name a rose is still a rose, and the same is true of teaching. An instructor at a college is no different from any other teacher, except ranking lower than professors in the faculty. The only scripture brother Woods' used to justify his position is the example of Aquila and Priscilla who took Apollos, and **"... expounded to him the way of God more accurately"** (Acts 18:26b). But brother Woods has misapplied that scripture.

He even implied that Priscilla was the chief instructor, since he said it was "Priscilla, assisted by her husband, Aquila ..." Thus, brother Woods relegates her husband to the role of an assistant. (Incidentally, by way of reminder, the word *husband* means, manager, not assistant.) He then generalizes this example to justify our sisters in our Bible schools who, he claims, are justified to "instruct", or "set forth, declare, and expound" the word of God to men in their classes.

My brothers, it does not promote the cause of truth to confuse the distinction between teaching (or instructing) and merely supplying information. This instance of Aquila and Priscilla is simply a situation which involved a husband, with his subordinate wife, informing a man more accurately about something.

1. Not lead, as so many modern songs have them do.

Consider an officer of the Army taking a private with him to inform another officer about something. To use such a case to draw conclusions about what privates have a right to do in the presence of officers is totally unjustified, especially when the conclusions violate plainly stated commands. When a subordinate conveys information to a superior, that in no way establishes a right to instruct superiors. By the very nature of the activity, a teacher/instructor is elevated above his students.

Students are said to study “under” their teachers. Paul said he was brought up “... **at the feet of Gamaliel ...**” (Acts 22:3). One reason why God has forbidden women to teach men is because it would violate the feminine role of subservience. When a woman takes on the role of a teacher/instructor/expounder of men, in that capacity she can no longer be subservient. Anyone who claims otherwise is blind to reality, including the Scriptures.

I also noticed that when brother Woods cited Titus 2:3-4, he failed to point out an important detail in that scripture. Paul gave command, saying, “**Aged women likewise be reverent in behavior, not slanderous, not enslaved to much wine, teachers of what is good, so that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children ...**” (Titus 2:3-4). Paul commanded them to teach “young women.” He neither said, nor implied, that they were to teach men. Brother Woods clearly misinterpreted that scripture when he used it to say that God commands women today to “instruct” men. He failed to point out the words Paul used to indicate who it was that the women were allowed to teach—the young women.

The command for older women to teach the young women is another widely neglected command these days. Oh, that my own Harding University (as well as all of our Christian schools) would stop using women to teach men, and would hire older women to teach the young women as commanded by God. There is an excellent little article in the October, 1995 issue of Gospel Advocate by a sister Sheila Butt. In her article she makes the following concluding remarks: “After all of my 20-plus years in the church, I still do not understand when I see the younger women of the congregation teaching the older women on a regular basis. Am I missing something here?” No, dear sister Butt, you and I both know that what is missing is obedience to God’s will.

What then, is the sum of these matters? Upon what does brother Woods’ support for these feminist practices rest? It does not rest

upon commands, examples, or even necessary inferences. The only commands from God, which I have found, contradict his conclusions. He mentions a single example of when a man with his wife shared information with another man outside the assembly. And he has provided no Bible evidence to infer the necessity of dismissing clearly stated commands which have been properly understood and obeyed since the foundation of the Church until the rise of feminism in modern times.

And now, my brothers, when any man contends with another, he always faces a certain dilemma. If he makes his case strong, the opposition will condemn it as being harsh. On the other hand, if he makes his case weak, it will fail. I have tried very hard to make a strong case for what I am convinced is the truth of God, without being harsh. I pray to the Lord my God that I have succeeded.

Yet, I may have offended some of you in what I have written, because brother Woods' position on this issue is very popular in the church as well as the world. But before you condemn me, please reflect upon the words of that faithful servant of God, the apostle Paul, who said, **“So then have I become your enemy telling you the truth?”** (Galatians 4:16).

“Now to the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, alone wise, to God is honor and glory into the ages of the ages” (1 Timothy 1:17).

Copyright © 1997. Walter L. Porter. All rights reserved.

Postscript: I had delivered a copy of this material to brother Ira Rice, editor of *Contending for the Faith* on November 27, 1995 with a request that he publish it. I have not yet received a response to that request. He did later publish a similar manuscript that criticized brother Woods about many of the same issues, which was submitted by a brother M. C. Brooks.