

# Paul on Women Speaking in Church

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I have recently received a letter from a valued friend asking me to send him a "discussion of the Greek words *laleo* and *lego* in such passages as 1 Corinthians 14:33-39, with special reference to the question: Does the thirty-fourth verse forbid all women everywhere to speak or preach publicly in Christian churches?" The matter is of universal interest, and I take the liberty of communicating my reply to the readers of *The Presbyterian*. It requires to be said at once that there is no problem with reference to the relations of *laleo* and *lego*. Apart from niceties of merely philological interest, these words stand related to one another just as the English words *speak* and *say* do; that is to say, *laleo* expresses the act of talking, while *lego* refers to what is said. Wherever then the fact of speaking, without reference to the content of what is said, is to be indicated, *laleo* is used, and must be used. There is nothing disparaging in the intimation of the word, any more than there is in our word *talk*; although, of course, it can on occasion be used disparagingly as our word *talk* can also—as when some of the newspapers intimate that the Senate is given over to mere talk. This disparaging application of *laleo*, however, never occurs in the New Testament, although the word is used very frequently. The word is in its right place in 1 Corinthians 14:33ff, therefore, and necessarily bears there its simple and natural meaning. If we needed anything to fix its meaning, however, it would be supplied by its frequent use in the preceding part of the chapter, where it refers not only to speaking with tongues (which was divine manifestation and unintelligible only because of the limitations of the hearers), but also to the prophetic speech, which is directly declared to be to edification and exhortation and comforting (verses 3-6). It would be supplied more pungently, however, by its contrasting term here—"let them be silent" (verse 34). Here we have *laleo* directly defined for us: "Let the women keep silent, for it is not permitted to them to speak." Keep silent - speak: these are the two opposites; and the one defines the other. It is important to observe, now, that the pivot on which the injunction of these verses turns is not the prohibition of speaking so much as the command of silence. That is the main injunction. The prohibition of speech is introduced only to explain the meaning more fully. What Paul says is in brief: "Let the women keep silent in the churches." That surely is direct and specific enough for all needs. He then adds explanatorily: "For it is not permitted to them to speak." "It is not permitted" is an appeal to a general law, valid apart from Paul's personal command, and looks back to the opening phrase—"as in all the churches of the saints." He is only requiring the Corinthian women to conform to the general law of the churches. And that is the meaning of the almost bitter words that he adds in verse 36, in which—reproaching them for the innovation of permitting women to speak in the churches—he reminds them that they are not the authors of the Gospel, nor are they its sole possessors: let them keep to the law that binds the whole body of churches and not be seeking some newfangled way of their own. The intermediate verses only make it plain that precisely what

the apostle is doing is forbidding women to speak at all in the church. His injunction of silence he pushes so far that he forbids them even to ask questions; and adds with special reference to that, but through that to the general matter, the crisp declaration that "it is indecent"—for that is the meaning of the word—"for a woman to speak in church." It would be impossible for the apostle to speak more directly or more emphatically than he has done here. He requires women to be silent at the church meetings; for that is what "in the churches" means, there were no church buildings then. And he has not left us in doubt as to the nature of these church meetings. He had just described them in verses 26ff. They were of the general character of our prayer meetings. Note the words "let him be silent in the church" in verse 30, and compare them with "let them be silent in the churches" in verse 34. The prohibition of women speaking covers thus all public church meetings - it is the publicity, not the formality of it, which is the point. And he tells us repeatedly that this is the universal law of the church. He does more than that. He tells us that it is the commandment of the Lord, and emphasises the word "Lord" (verse 37). The passage in 1 Timothy 2:11ff. is just as strong, although it is more particularly directed to the specific case of public teaching or ruling in the church. The apostle had already in this context (verse 8, "the men," in contrast with "women" of verse 9) pointedly confined public praying to men, and now continues: "Let a woman learn in silence in all subjection; but I do not permit the woman to teach, neither to rule over the man, but to be in silence." Neither the teaching nor the ruling function is permitted to woman. The apostle says here, "I do not permit," instead of as in 1 Corinthians 14:33ff., "it is not permitted," because he is here giving his personal instructions to Timothy, his subordinate, while there he was announcing to the Corinthians the general law of the church. What he instructs Timothy, however, is the general law of the church. And so he goes on and grounds his prohibition in a universal reason which affects the entire race equally. In the face of these two absolutely plain and emphatic passages, what is said in 1 Corinthians 11:5 cannot be appealed to in mitigation or modification. Precisely what is meant in 1 Corinthians 11:5, nobody quite knows. What is said there is that every woman praying or prophesying unveiled dishonours her head. It seems fair to infer that if she prays or prophesies veiled she does not dishonour her head. And it seems fair still further to infer that she may properly pray or prophesy if only she does it veiled. We are piling up a chain of inferences. And they have not carried us very far. We cannot infer that it would be proper for her to pray or prophesy in church if only she were veiled. There is nothing said about church in the passage or in the context. The word "church" does not occur until the 16th verse, and then not as ruling the reference of the passage, but only as supplying support for the injunction of the passage. There is no reason whatever for believing that "praying and prophesying" in church is meant. Neither was an exercise confined to the church. If, as in 1 Corinthians 14:14, the "praying" spoken of was an ecstatic exercise - as its place by "prophesying" may suggest - then there would be the divine inspiration superseding all ordinary laws to be reckoned with. And there has already been occasion to observe that prayer in public is forbidden to women in 1 Timothy 2:8, 9 - unless mere attendance at prayer is meant, in which case this passage is a close parallel of 1 Timothy 2:9.

What must be noted in conclusion is:

- (1) That the prohibition of speaking in the church to women is precise, absolute, and all-inclusive. They are to keep silent in the churches - and that means in all the public meetings for worship; they are not even to ask questions;

- (2) that this prohibition is given especial point precisely for the two matters of teaching and ruling covering specifically the functions of preaching and ruling elders;
- (3) that the grounds on which the prohibition is put are universal and turn on the difference in sex, and particularly on the relative places given to the sexes in creation and in the fundamental history of the race (the fall).

Perhaps it ought to be added in elucidation of the last point just made that the difference in conclusions between Paul and the feminist movement of today is rooted in a fundamental difference in their points of view relative to the constitution of the human race. To Paul, the human race is made up of families, and every several organism—the church included—is composed of families, united together by this or that bond. The relation of the sexes in the family follow it therefore into the church. To the feminist movement the human race is made up of individuals; a woman is just another individual by the side of the man, and it can see no reason for any differences in dealing with the two. And, indeed, if we can ignore the great fundamental natural difference of sex and destroy the great fundamental social unit of the family in the interest of individualism, there does not seem any reason why we should not wipe out the differences established by Paul between the sexes in the church—except, of course, the authority of Paul. It all, in the end, comes back to the authority of the apostles, as founders of the church. We may like what Paul says, or we may not like it. We may be willing to do what he commands, or we may not be willing to do it. But there is no room for doubt of what he says. And he certainly would say to us what he said to the Corinthians: "What? Was it from you that the word of God went forth? Or came it to you alone?" Is this Christianity ours—to do with as we like? Or is it God's religion, receiving its laws from him through the apostles?