

What Kind of Assembly? – 1 Corinthians 14:26–40

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Introduction

Is it Scriptural for a woman to translate a Gospel message delivered by a man from one language to another for a mixed assembly of men and women? In about 1995, brethren began earnestly discussing this question in lectureships, papers, and debate. This discussion arose because, in a very few cases, some who were preaching in foreign lands used women to translate as they preached. Figuring prominently in this discussion has been 1 Corinthians 14, especially verses 26–40, and even more especially verses 34–35:

Let the women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but let them be in subjection, as also saith the law. And if they would learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home: for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church.

The principal contention relating to 1 Corinthians 14:26ff. has to do with whether or not the assembly therein described should be considered (1) a regular or ordinary (for lack of a better term) Lord's day assembly in Corinth or (2) a special assembly specifically for the exercise of some of their spiritual gifts which, in the very nature of the case (due to the cessation of spiritual gifts), cannot be duplicated today.

The implication of position (1) above is that women must maintain absolute silence (vv. 34–35) in our mixed worship assemblies today. This view definitely forbids the woman translator function. (Obviously, if this passage forbids a woman to utter a word in the worship assembly then it forbids her to orally translate.) The implication of position (2) above is that the detailed instructions regulating this meeting do not apply to our assemblies today (although there are some abiding general principles). Those who argue this view of the passage assert that verses 34–35 do not demand absolute silence of women in regular worship meetings and thus do not forbid her to function as a translator to mixed gender assemblies under certain circumstances.

A Response to An Article

Initially (and specifically), I wish to respond to some selected statements in an article a brother wrote on this subject ("Does First Corinthians Chapter Fourteen Address Today's Assemblies of Saints?" *Seek the Old Paths*, May 1996). I heartily agree with some of the article (e.g., the author's comments on the respective authority/submission roles of men and women). I appreciate his zeal for maintaining the Scriptural limitations upon women in worship

assemblies. I assure him that I (and others who respectfully disagree with some of his conclusions) are just as zealous to maintain these limitations as he is.

He asks near the beginning of his article: “Does the Keep Silence statement of 1 Cor. 14:34–35 apply today as it did in the first century? Many are convinced, by good reasons, it does with equal force.” He is among those who so believe (and his article is apparently representative of the convictions of those who agree with him). However, some brethren are equally convinced “by good reasons” that it does not so apply today.

He acknowledges that many argue that 1 Corinthians 14:34 (and its context) cannot apply to modern worship assemblies because the women in this passage are forbidden to speak so as to utter a sound, yet all Christians (including women) are commanded to both speak and teach in singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Yes, but this is by no means the only “good reason” to question the hypothesis that the meeting of 1 Corinthians 14:26–40 is an ordinary worship assembly (sans the miraculous element) which we can duplicate today. I will subsequently set forth several others.

In his first paragraph he apparently describes those who differ with him as follows: “Numerous are those who affirm that at least parts of the fourteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians do not apply today.” If I understand him, he is implying that unless one applies everything in 1 Corinthians 14 to our situation today, he errs. But does he (or anyone else) believe that all of it applies to us today? What about the following: “...Desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy” (v. 1)? Or, “Now I would have you all speak with tongues, but rather that ye should prophesy” (v. 5)? Again, “Wherefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues” (v. 39)? I know of no faithful brother who affirms that absolutely none of it applies in any respect to the church today. What we must do then is determine not whether it applies, but by means of careful exegesis, how much of it still applies specifically to those past the miraculous age.

Our brother, on the basis of verse 34, says that in connection with “formal discourse” (preaching/teaching) in the worship assembly, “God has forbidden the woman to utter not [*sic*] a sound in the sense of speaking.” He is certain that this even includes: “She may not whisper to her husband an explanation of what is said.” He says, “This is the force of the word translated *silence* in verse 34,” after which he quotes the verse. Then he says, “The word *silence* is from the Greek *lalein* meaning to utter not a sound; to not speak at all.” (He is obviously confused in his reference to *lalein*. Rather than being the Greek word that means “silence,” it is an infinitive that

means “to speak”; the Greek word for “keep silence” is *sigatosan*). Most certainly there is some circumstance in which some women are to remain absolutely silent, but who are the women and what is the circumstance?

The article under review asserts that the proscription of a woman’s (and a man’s [vv. 28, 30]) uttering words applies only to the specific context of “a male delivering a formal discourse in the worship assembly of the saints.” The writer concludes that the prohibition therefore does not apply to her singing, but only to her saying anything during the sermon. This, however, assumes at least two things that must be proved:

1. That the assembly under discussion is merely an ordinary worship assembly comparable to ours and
2. That the prohibition laid upon the women relates **only** to the time when a man “is delivering a formal discourse” in the assumed worship assembly. I will address these assumptions later.

The author of the article is rather free in his assumptions concerning those who view 1 Corinthians 14 differently from him and concerning their attitude toward this passage. Near the beginning of his essay (concerning verses 34–35) he avers: “In fact, this is the critical part of Scripture the advocates of women interpreters among men wish would go away.” It is rather serious to charge brethren with wishing this or any other portion of God’s inspired Word would “go away.” I cannot speak for others, but for myself I deny the allegation and resent even the suggestion of it. This averment constitutes an unwarranted judgment of my motives.

Later he wrote: “This [i.e., his conclusion that a woman is forbidden to utter a word in the worship assembly] is why those who wish women to be involved in authority roles in the worship service do not want 1 Corinthians chapter fourteen to be applicable today.” Is he accusing all who take a different view of 1 Corinthians 14 from that which he holds of wanting “women to be involved in authority roles in the worship service”? Is he lumping in with rank liberals all who respectfully suggest that there are situations in which a woman translator could Scripturally be employed (in a mixed-gender worship assembly)? Does he intend to suggest that all who disagree with him are change agents and “women’s libbers” who have no respect for Scriptural worship and who are bent on destroying the church? If so, he makes a reckless accusation indeed. It is not that those who disagree with him do not want 1 Corinthians 14 to be applicable today. Rather, we are merely seeking the **correct** application of its details (as we are willing to give him credit for doing).

Again, he opines: “Many...probably accepted this view [i.e., that the meeting of 1 Cor. 14:26–40 relates peculiarly to the miraculous age] because it was easier to handle in debate than to face the difficult questions raised if we view this chapter as applicable to modern worship assemblies....” Did it never occur to our brother that brethren who differ with him just might have arrived at their conclusions about the nature of the meeting in these verses from their study of the context? Similarly, I could say: “Many probably hold his view of these verses because it is thereby easier for them to support their opposition to women translators than to deal with the difficult questions they would have to face if they viewed the assembly described in the context as one pertaining peculiarly to the miraculous age,” but I will not. I am sure he would resent it if I did, and I would not blame him. Likewise, He should not be surprised if those who differ with him on this passage resent his assignment of motives.

The brother says, “This matter of interpreters resolves into an authority question.” He then asks two questions, which he believes, demonstrate the lack of Biblical authority for a woman to translate before or otherwise address a gender-mixed worship assembly. He follows his two questions with a related syllogism. However, as before, he has based his conclusion, his two questions, and his syllogism upon his assumption that 1 Corinthians 14:26–40 describes an ordinary worship assembly comparable to ours today. Thus, his conclusion, questions, and syllogism are invalid until he has proved that an ordinary worship assembly is the setting of this passage.

The article further alleges: “Many who use women interpreters argue that the assembly of chapter fourteen was not identical to ours today because of the presence of miraculous gifts in the assembly.” No, not because of the “presence” of the miraculous gifts, but because of the **preeminence** of their exercise in this meeting (note this in every verse, vv. 26–32). He claims that, if we reject this Corinthian meeting as identical to ours due to the miraculous element, then, since there were some who possessed the gifts present in all of their meetings, we are left without an assembly like ours today in all of the New Testament. Therefore, he supposes that we would be left without a standard for worship except “our conscience and intellect.” How easy it is to tear down a straw man of one’s own making.

Our brother comments in the closing part of his article on the “constituent element” argument (as set out in *Contending for the Faith*, February 1996), which demonstrates that there is Scriptural authority for using a woman translator when necessary. He thinks that the argument made there is flawed because it proves too much, namely that if a woman may address a mixed

worship assembly as a translator, she could, on the same ground, preach in said assembly. Here we find another assumption for which no proof has been offered – the assumption that translating a message being delivered by a preacher is tantamount to preaching itself. He therefore charges that the article omitted an essential element in the list of constituent elements: “Where may a woman address a mixed audience in the formal discourse context of a worship assembly?” The article (and argument) did not omit this element, however. It included such addresses in a mixed assembly when it noted that she is authorized either to confess the name of Christ (Rom. 10:9–10) or to confess her sins (Jam. 5:16; 1 John 1:9). Now these activities were not part of the singing, the prayers, the Lord’s supper, or the contribution. They are rather in connection with the Gospel invitation, which is actually an extension of “the formal discourse context of a worship assembly,” as our brother describes it. Now this authorization in no way authorizes her to preach to a mixed assembly, nor is it presented as an argument to favor such behavior. Nevertheless, it does prove that there is nothing inherently sinful in her uttering words in and/or to a mixed assembly.

The Nature of The Assembly in 1 Corinthians 14:26–40

Many earnest Bible students whom I esteem highly and who are close friends view 1 Corinthians 14:26–40 as an ordinary worship setting. However, many other brethren, just as earnest and just as highly esteemed as friends and fellow workers (and just as able exegetes), view this context as an extraordinary meeting specifically for edification through the exercise of spiritual gifts rather than an ordinary meeting for worship. I arrived at this conclusion years before the “woman translator” issue ever arose among brethren, and I did **not** arrive at it in view of discussion of this issue or “because it was easier to handle in debate.” However, realizing that neither view is totally devoid of difficulties, I do not intend to be dogmatic about it. I will now set forth some reasons why I believe this must have been a meeting in addition to and distinct from a regular worship assembly.

1. Apparently everyone present at this meeting had a **spiritual gift** (“...each one hath a psalm...teaching,...revelation,...tongue,...interpretation,” v. 26). Such is impossible today.
2. The purpose of the meeting was edification, learning, and exhortation of the church (vv. 26b, 31) by the orderly exercise of various **spiritual gifts**, especially those of teaching, revelation, and prophecy (v. 26a). (We should bear in mind that the Gospel was still in the process of being revealed when Paul wrote to the Corinthians [1 Cor. 13:8–12]. They did not have a written New Testament to which they could turn for their revelation, edification, learning, and exhortation. However, the Lord was revealing His Truth through various oral prophets

who then declared it to the brethren. Meetings in addition to the Lord's day assembly for the purpose of receiving Truth and delivering it to the infant church were a necessity and must have been frequent.) We neither have nor need spiritual gifts for our revelation, edification, learning, or exhortation.

3. There had to be a minimum of two and a maximum of three men who **spoke in tongues**, speaking only one at a time, and only then if an inspired interpreter (i.e., translator) (cf. 12:10) were present (v. 27). If no interpreter (translator) were present, the tongues speaker was to remain silent (v. 28). What is there here that remotely resembles a regular worship assembly?
4. As with the tongues speakers, so with the **inspired prophets**: there were to be two, but no more than three to speak (v. 29). However, if while one was speaking another received a revelation, the first was to stop speaking so the other could prophesy (v. 30). Where can one find an assembly today that features inspired prophets?
5. There was a strict limitation on the speaking of **inspired men** in this meeting (vv. 28–29). If even some **inspired** men were not allowed to speak, then it follows that **uninspired** men could not speak at all in this meeting. Since we have no inspired men today, such a meeting as this would have to be conducted in total silence.
6. Now we come to the instructions concerning certain women: "The women" were to remain silent in this assembly; they were not to utter a word or make a vocal sound (for so the Greek word *sigatosan* means), even to learn something (vv. 34–35). While "women" correctly translates the Greek term *gunaikes*, "wives" would also have been a correct rendering (the term can mean either as determined by the context). It is immediately evident that Paul is addressing wives due to his references to (1) subjection as found in the law (cf. Gen. 3:16) and (2) "their own husbands." It seems most likely that the husbands referred to were the prophets discussed immediately before the women (wives) are mentioned (vv. 29–33). It follows that he is saying that the prophets' wives were to be utterly silent to the extent that even if one had some question about the inspired message her husband was delivering in the exercise of his **miraculous gift**, she was to wait until they got home to ask it.

We find several elements of contrast between this assembly and any that we can conduct today in this injunction to the wives:

- a. There are no inspired prophets whose wives can ask them questions about their messages today.
- b. There are no wives of prophets to ask such questions.
- c. In regular worship assemblies women not only have permission, but are commanded to speak as they sing (Eph. 5:19), and, when appropriate, to publicly confess their faith in Christ (Rom. 10:9–10) or to confess their sins (1 John 1:9). However, in this Corinthian meeting the "women/wives" are forbidden to utter a sound. Remember, the article under consideration says that this prohibition applies only to the "**formal discourse context**" (i.e., the sermon) of a worship assembly, thus freeing her to sing and/or confess at other times in the assembly. However, this is to assume that which Paul does not say. I do not

mean to be unkind to my brethren, but those who thus argue seem to want the silence of the women to be absolute only to the degree that it will fit their opposition to women translators. Paul mentions singing at the very beginning of the passage (v. 26), and I am unable to discover anything in the entire context to warrant the conclusion that the ban on all speech by the women was lifted when the singing started. Since women are to speak (in singing, confessing) in regular worship assemblies, but they are forbidden to speak at all in the type of meeting described in 1 Corinthians 14:26–40, I conclude that the latter was not a regular worship assembly. Therefore, the details governing that kind of meeting have not been applicable since the cessation of the gifts that were peculiar to it.

- d. **Women who were wives** (and likely only the wives of prophets, as discussed above) were specifically forbidden to speak in this Corinthian meeting. (From this fact we may perhaps even infer that other women besides prophets' wives were not present at this meeting, which in itself, would be far different from a normal worship assembly.) Given the fact that the injunction is directed particularly to wives in the Corinthian meeting (for sake of argument I will grant that these were wives "in general" rather than prophets' wives specifically), how can those who view this meeting as an ordinary worship assembly apply the injunction to any women who were not wives? It would be impossible for a woman who has not married, a widow, or, for that matter, a woman married to an unbeliever or even a woman married to a Christian who is an ignoramus in the Bible to adhere to Paul's instruction. Would they even be amenable to it? This point further demonstrates that this was not an ordinary worship assembly and that the details of this setting therefore do not apply to ordinary worship assemblies.

7. It is undeniable that the first century church conducted other meetings besides the first day of the week worship assemblies. The church in Jerusalem met daily for some time (Acts 2:46). There was some sort of meeting in which women could and did prophesy (Acts 21:8–9; 1 Cor. 11:5), but it could not have been the regular gender-mixed worship assembly (1 Tim. 2:11–12). I believe Paul describes another such extraordinary meeting in 1 Corinthians 14:26ff.

Additional Thoughts

If the meeting of 1 Corinthians 14:26–40 was peculiar to the first century age and was not identical with an ordinary worship assembly (and therefore the specific instructions concerning it do not apply to ordinary worship assemblies), does this open the door for women preachers in mixed assemblies as some sincerely fear? I do not believe it does. It is generally conceded that the setting of 1 Timothy 2:8–12 is a regular worship assembly. There is a total absence of any reference to the miraculous element; yet there are references to prayer, learning, and teaching with emphasis upon the respective roles of men and women regarding them (vv. 8, 11–12). Significantly, this passage speaks of "a woman," that is, "any and every Christian woman" (not "the women," i.e., the wives of prophets [1 Cor. 14:34–35]). Paul enjoins all women to learn in a

spirit of subjection (to the man who is teaching/preaching, implied). He forbids any behavior in women that would place them in a teaching role in which they “exercise dominion over a man” (ASV).

Also, they are to demonstrate “quietness.” This word (*hesuchia*) is not an absolute ban on speech (as is *sigatosan* in 1 Cor. 14:34), but is a much milder term relating more to meekness of demeanor arising from within than to absolute silence. Thus, in these regulations, while the woman is certainly not permitted to preach or otherwise speak in such a way as to exercise dominion over a man (who is her head in God’s arrangement), she is not forbidden to sing or make confession, neither of which violate her role of quietness and subjection in the ordinary worship assembly.

I do not believe a woman who translates the live message of a Gospel preacher to a mixed worship assembly violates 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 because I do not believe the injunctions there are applicable beyond the peculiar type of meeting therein described (a meeting that cannot be duplicated today). I do not believe a woman who translates the live message of a Gospel preacher to a mixed assembly violates 1 Timothy 2:8–12. She does not “exercise dominion over” either the preacher or the men who may be hearing her as she simply delivers the message of the authoritative preacher in the language of the hearers.

Although translation of language was not involved, the relationship between Jehovah, Moses, and Aaron is instructive. After Moses had offered various excuses for not obeying God’s commission to lead Israel out of Egypt, he offered one more: “And Moses said unto Jehovah, Oh, Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue” (Exo. 4:10). God responded that this would be no problem because “I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt speak” (v. 12). When Moses was still reluctant, he provoked the Lord to anger and God told him that his brother Aaron would be his spokesman:

And thou shalt speak unto him and put the words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. **And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and it shall come to pass, that he shall be to thee a mouth, and thou shalt be to him as God”** (vv. 15–16; emph. DM).

Notice that (1) Moses received his message from God, and (2) Aaron received his message from Moses. The first application of this arrangement was before the Israelites: “And

Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel: **and Aaron spake all the words which Jehovah had spoken unto Moses**, and did the signs in the sight of the people” (Exo. 4:29-30; emph. DM). Does anyone imagine that those Israelites ever had a question about whether Moses or Aaron was the human “authority figure”? God was very specific concerning this very issue as it pertained to Pharaoh:

And Jehovah said unto Moses, See, **I have made thee as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. Thou shalt speak all that I command thee; and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh**, that he let the children of Israel go out of his land (Exo. 7:1-2; emph. DM).

When God began sending the plagues on Egypt, Moses not only **spoke** through Aaron, but he **acted** through him as well by telling him to produce the respective plagues (4:30; 7:8, 19; 8:5; et al.). Frequently woven through the entire account of Moses’ and Aaron’s confrontations with Pharaoh is the fact that God was communicating directly with Moses, and Aaron was only a pipeline through which Moses’ authoritative message traveled (6:1-2, 10, 29; 7:1, 8, 14, 19; 8:1; et al.). Later Aaron (along with Miriam) forgot his subordinate, non-authoritative role and said, “Hath Jehovah indeed spoken only with Moses? hath he not spoken also with us? And Jehovah heard it” (Num. 12:2). God made known to him his grave error in the clearest of terms (vv. 5-10).

While allowing for the fact that God was speaking directly to and through Moses and He speaks today only through His written Word, what do we learn from the above?

1. God described Aaron as the “spokesman” and “mouth” of Moses, who was to give Aaron the words to speak. This is what happens in the modern translation setting: The preacher gives the words to the translator and the translator serves as his “mouth” with no authority whatsoever inhering in the spokesman (or -woman). God recognizes that the one who is authorized to deliver His message today (a man preaching before a gender-mixed worship assembly) is His authoritative servant in that setting, rather than one who might be merely speaking the words of his message (a translator, whether male or female).
2. The audiences of Moses and Aaron (i.e., the Israelites and Pharaoh) understood that Moses, rather than Aaron, was the authority figure, even though Aaron acted and spoke before them. Likewise, it should be evident that, when one stands before an assembly and speaks in a language different from that in which a man is preaching, in the very nature of the case the preacher is literally dictating what he or she is to say in translation. **The person being translated, rather than the translator, possesses the authority in this setting.**

3. Aaron (and Miriam) forgot who God's authoritative spokesman was (Moses) and foolishly claimed equal authority for themselves. This insubordination provoked God's intense wrath because it actually represented rebellion against Him. If a translator (male or female) should seek authority for the translator role, he/she would be imitating Aaron and Miriam and would be totally out of order and in rebellion against God.
4. The episode of Aaron's rebellion illustrates clearly that he was not in an authority position over anyone he addressed, whether Israel or Pharaoh. Likewise, a translator (related to the preacher as Aaron was to Moses) is not in a position of authority, but he or she is in one of submission/servant.

That the authority inheres in the source (i.e., **person with whom the message originates**) alone (rather than in its translator) is perfectly understood in every international political or commercial discussion and courtroom when a translator must be employed. How (and why) do some so carelessly discard and deny this obvious fact when it comes to translating the Gospel of Christ while it is being preached?

Conclusion

From conversations with those who work in foreign areas and from my own experience in those fields it is evident that the use of a woman translator among us is extremely unusual and exceptional. I know of none who are eager to use or who are advocating the use of women translators as their first choice. None that I know of has mounted a campaign urging everyone in foreign evangelism to immediately begin choosing women rather than men to translate. I am just as opposed as any (and more so than some) to women in the pulpit (or any other place of authority over men in the church). **The crux of the matter is that the woman who translates the Gospel message of a man and the woman who would preach the Gospel are not parallel.**

It would be an indescribable tragedy for brethren to refuse to extend fellowship to one another over this matter. I respect those who cannot in good conscience use a woman translator. I plead with those thus minded that they tread very cautiously before deciding that their faithful brethren who disagree with them are apostates and unworthy of their fellowship.

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