

Mixed Bible Studies: Can Women Participate?

-Bryant Evans

I have been asked my thoughts on the participation of women in a mixed Bible study. The question specifically related to a devotional-type setting apart from Sunday School. In my judgment, the distinction is not really needed. Women may not lead but may participate, including comment, in a Bible study.

The central texts relevant to this question seem to be 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Other texts will be added to supplement our study.

The Scripture is to be given the highest authority in this discussion. It is not a question of what we like or what we are comfortable with. The only question that should concern us is what the Bible says. There is no present day revelation to set aside the Scriptures. God has not “laid a message” on anyone’s heart that differs from what he has revealed already and confirmed via miracles. Using sound reasoning we can know what the Bible teaches on this subject or any other.

The texts before us are:

For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Corinthians 14:33-35)

And,

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. (1 Timothy 2:11-15)

1 Corinthians 14:33-35

Context

This passage occurs as part of a larger section addressing chaotic worship practices and the misuse of miraculous, spiritual gifts. The block probably begins in 11:1 and extends through 16:4.

Chapter 15 is an excursus on the resurrection and seems oddly placed but it does lend weight to the importance of the faith.

In any case, Paul is arguing for quiet and peaceful worship services. *“But all things should be done decently and in order”* (14:40) is the foundation of his argument.

I conclude that women actively participating in the worship was part of the chaos and had to be stopped.

Words

“in the church”

Proper definitions are vital. The phrase “in the church” must be understood appropriately. What is the church? How does Paul intend for the phrase to be understood. Must women be silent *always* after being added to the church (Acts 2:41, 47)? Should we understand “church” to mean something other than the collective body of the saved?

The church always exists. It does not come and go. If I am “in the church” on Sunday I will also be “in the church” on Monday. If I am “in the church” in the assembly I am also “in the church” at home. Paul teaches that it is acceptable for a women to speak at home (1 Corinthians 14:35) but not “in the church.” Since the church does not dissolve when the assembly ends could he mean something different?

It is best understood that Paul here is speaking of the worship of the church, not the church as a body. To say that women are to be silent “in the church” is to say that women are to be silent “in the worship.” This fits nicely and reasonably with the nature of the church and with the context in which he is speaking.

1 Timothy 2:11-15

Context

Paul offers Timothy several admonitions here for the proper functioning of the church. It seems that his view is broader than just the worship service but likely extends into daily life. We say this because the initial charge to Timothy includes warnings about items not thought to appear within the corporate worship itself. Paul mentions “myths and endless genealogies” (1:4), “vain discussion” (1:6) and a desire to teach without proper understanding (1:7).

Premised upon his chapter 1 comments Paul begins to “peaceful and quiet life” (2:2). He mentions the need for prayer and the demands of modest attire for women (2:8-10). It is then he requires the submissiveness of the woman in teaching.

Crux

The matter here should be well settled. Women cannot teach men nor can they exercise authority over them (2:12). The words “exercise authority” arise from a single Greek word. That word can be translated as “to control in a domineering manner” (Louw, 1996). The ASV 1901 actually includes the word dominion in the verse. It has *“I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness.”* Guthrie suggests “[i]n public meetings Christian women must refrain from laying down the law to men and hence are enjoined to silence” (Guthrie, 1984).

Paul authoritatively prohibits the teaching of a Christian man by a woman. This prohibition is perfectly explained by the immediately following phrase “*to exercise authority over a man.*” I would stress that any woman teaching a Bible class exercises authority over the people in the class. The beginning and ending of the class, the curriculum, the emphasis of various points and the generally content of the class is determined by the teacher. Thus a woman may not teach, preach or otherwise hold any position of authority over the men.

Culture

Is culture the issue? Was this a prohibition anchored in the culture of the day? Does this reflect the *sitz im leben* of first century Christianity? If so, the present day church could feel comfortable in altering our worship practices to allow women to teach. But such is not the case. Many today are presumptuously changing the clear teaching of Scripture in order to place women in places of church authority. They have failed to ask the simple question: What does the Bible say?

Paul explains his rationale for prohibiting women in leadership roles. In 1st Timothy 2:13-15 he states the reason. Adam came first in creation and Eve sinned first. She is still subject to the glories of salvation but because of the chronology of creation and the chronology of transgression, she is restricted to the submissive role. Those who lay claim to a cultural interpretation must deal with these three verses which take the entire discussion out of culture and all the way back to Eden. There is nothing cultural in this passage. The modern mind may not understand why a decision by Eve thousands of years ago is binding but it is. Paul lays down the restriction and explains why. Only by setting aside these verses can one overcome the objection to women in roles of authority.

Conclusion

The issue before us whether a woman can verbally participate in a Bible study or class. We have shown that the issue in view is not total silence in the bricks and mortar building, but a respecting of male authority in any setting.

We therefore conclude that a woman may participate in a Bible class or devotional so long as she is submissive to the male teacher. She may offer thoughts, reflect on points or read Scripture when asked to do so. But she may not lead the discussion, class or prayer.