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Women Speak
In Mixed
Public
Assemblies?*

BY

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SHOULD WOMEN SPEAK IN MIXED PUBLIC ASSEMBLIES?

BY JOHN A. BROADUS, D. D., LL.D.

There is at present a strong tendency in some parts of our country to encourage women in the practice of public discourse to mixed assemblies. This connects itself, more or less, with the movements for female suffrage, though some strongly favor the one who are opposed to the other. Christian civilization has by degrees greatly elevated the female sex; and now the demand is, in many quarters, that women shall be encouraged to do, if they like, anything and everything that men do. On the other hand, many of both sexes are persuaded that the Holy Scriptures, which have been the chief cause of the elevation of women, place certain restrictions about their public activities, and enjoin some kind of subordination of wife to husband. The questions arising in connection with these movements of opinion and practice are many and various, and some of them appeal to powerful human prejudices and sentiments. It is by no means

proposed that this tract shall take the wide range thus indicated. It will be confined to the question raised at the outset, and to the limitations with which that question is stated; and will be chiefly occupied with an attempt to explain the passages of Scripture which appear to forbid women's speaking in mixed assemblies. No thoughtful person would like to profess that in our country at the present moment he can make this investigation in a completely impartial and dispassionate manner; but it is obviously very desirable that writer and readers in such a case should earnestly strive to deal fairly with their own minds and with the truth of God.

In I. Corinthians 14:34f. the Apostle Paul says: "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." In I. Timothy 2:11-15 the apostle has been speaking of public worship, directing that "the men (i.e., the men as distinguished from the women, the Greek having a special term) pray in every place, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and disputing." He then directs that women "adorn themselves in modest apparel," etc. The amount of this

seems to be that in public worship the men, who do the public praying, shall see that the hands they solemnly lift are not stained with sin, and that in their mutual instruction and exhortation there shall be no angry disputation. These are two special dangers with men. And the women are warned against one of their special dangers, viz., that in attending on public worship they will have too much of showy personal adornment. He then proceeds: "Let a woman learn in quietness with all subjection. But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness. For Adam was first formed, then Eve; and Adam was not beguiled, but the woman being beguiled, hath fallen into transgression; but she shall be saved through the child-bearing, if they continue in faith and love and sanctification with sobriety."

The passages are here quoted from the Revised English Version, according to the English form, from which the American form makes only one not very important variation in each passage. The Revised Version does not materially differ in either of these passages from the Common Version, but several expressions are plainer or more exact. For instance, in I. Corinthians the terms "subjection" is used, the Greek having the same word that is

translated subjection in the other passage, and in I. Peter 3:1, which shows the three passages to be exactly parallel in this respect. It may be observed that many apparently slight variations in the Revised Version arise from the desire to translate the same Greek word by the same English word, wherever possible. Many alterations which superficial critics have denounced as trifling, thus become important to the careful comparison of similar passages.

Now it does not need to be urged that these two passages from the Apostle Paul do definitely and strongly forbid that women shall speak in mixed public assemblies. No one can afford to question that such is the most obvious meaning of the apostle's commands. All that can be said in opposition to the view that this is what he intended to teach, must rest either upon a supposed unusual sense of some one of the terms employed in the passages, or upon the connection, or upon some other source of information about the persons addressed, and the apostle's aim.

Some have suggested that the word rendered "speak," in I. Cor. verse 34, "it is not permitted unto them to speak," denotes idle chatter as opposed to thoughtful and earnest speaking. It is enough to say that this proposed distinction is quite a failure. The word which commonly means to talk, speak, etc.,

is sometimes used in classical Greek for chattering, and is sometimes applied to animals. But there are no clear examples of any such use in Biblical Greek, and the word is applied to apostles, prophets, the Saviour, God. See Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. Others lay stress on the word "church" or "churches," and hold that the apostle means a formal public meeting, as distinguished from what we call a social meeting, such as a prayer-meeting, or the like. Applying a purely modern distinction, they say that a woman is forbidden to speak in "church," but that does not forbid her speaking in prayer-meeting. The answer is that the New Testament knows no such distinction. In fact, the very abuses in public worship which the apostle seeks in I. Cor. chap. 12 and chap. 14 to correct, are such as could only have risen in an informal meeting, where every one thought himself at liberty to rise and speak. Moreover, the same word "church" (the Greek meaning an assembly) is applied to meetings in private houses, as that of Aquila and Priscilla, or that of Philemon and Apphia. So this distinction also fails.

Some remind us that in I. Cor. 11:5ff. the apostle has spoken of women as "praying or prophesying" in the public assemblies. That is true, and our first business is to reconcile

the apostle with himself. The word "prophecy" in the New Testament means to speak by divine inspiration. This the apostle repeatedly distinguishes on the one hand from utterances in an unknown tongue, and on the other hand from ordinary uninspired teaching. Some persons in the apostolic age were inspired to speak in unknown tongues, others in the language of those addressed. Among these last were some women, just as there are several cases of prophetesses in the Old Testament. In chap. 11 the apostle speaks of such inspired women, and urges upon them that in their high excitement they must not disregard propriety of appearance and behavior; in particular, that they must keep the head covered in the customary manner. Now, unless the apostle has contradicted himself, we seem shut up to understand that the passage in chap. 14 is a general direction leaving out the case of women who prophesied, i. e., spoke by special inspiration. There is no such inspired speaking possible for us. True, it has been argued that when the apostle says (I. Cor. 14:3), "He that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification," we may infer that any one who speaks in an edifying way is prophesying, and that if a woman can speak so as to edify, she is exempt from the apostle's prohibition. The author of this argument had forgotten the first

elements of his logic, which certainly taught him that he must beware of assuming a proposition to be convertible. All prophesying was edifying speech; but how in the world can it be inferred that all edifying speech is prophecy? Yellow fever is a malarial disease; shall we infer that all malarial diseases are yellow fever?

A more plausible method of explaining away Paul's prohibition consists in maintaining that it applied only to the peculiar ideas and manners of that time. Thus some say it applied only to women at Corinth, a place famous for licentiousness, where it was necessary that Christian women should observe peculiar strictness of decorum in public places. But the apostle makes the same prohibition through Timothy for the churches in the region about Ephesus. And observe, he grounds his prohibition (in the passage from Timothy) upon facts connected with the Creation and the fall of Adam and Eve. Does not this absolutely forbid restricting his prohibition to Corinth and Ephesus, or to that particular age? The same consideration applies when the prohibition is likened to his direction in chap. 11 that a woman must not appear in the public meeting without a covering on her head. We are told that this applied simply to the ideas and customs then prevailing. Let us not be so sure

that such is the case. In point of fact, almost all Christian women seem to have a feeling that the apostle's direction applies to them, for they very rarely fail to wear in religious assemblies some form of head covering, which in the mutations of fashion has sometimes been vastly more diminutive than at present, but is never discarded. And whatever may be thought as to that point, we must remember that in the epistle to Timothy the apostle especially grounds his injunction upon primal facts in human history, and thereby cuts it off from being fairly regarded as temporary.

Two other attempts to explain away the apostle's prohibition are worth mention as indicating desperate straits. When he says, "And if they would learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home," some actually infer that women who have no husbands are left at liberty "to speak in the church." So then an unmarried woman may put herself publicly forward in a way which for married women would be "shameful." A recent writer thinks it probable that the two passages in question have "suffered modification from transcribers." When a hard-pressed controversialist urges that some passage may be corrupt, **without a particle** of documentary evidence to that effect, he inevitably suggests that his own interpretations of the passage as

it stands are not really satisfactory to his own mind.

So the apostle's clear and consistent prohibitions stand unshaken, in their obvious sense. But consider just what he prohibits. Is it not this? He says a woman must not speak in mixed assemblies—those in which men are present; because she is thus undertaking to “teach” men, to “have dominion” over them; and this is inconsistent with that “subjection” of the woman to the man which both passages enjoin, and which the Bible so often asserts. Then he does not forbid a woman to “speak” or to “teach” where women only are present. There is no prohibition of feminine discourse in female prayer-meetings or missionary societies. Only keep the men out. And beware of some “entering-wedge” in the shape of an editor or masculine reporter. As to crying out against the Bible for teaching “the subjection of woman,” leave that to Ingersoll. The precise nature and proper limits of this subjection may not be generally understood, and would be an appropriate subject for earnest inquiry. But that the Bible does teach subjection, and that the apostle makes that his special reason for the prohibition before us, would seem to be quite beyond question.

A Baptist lady in Kansas wrote that she read

the foregoing as published in the "Western Recorder." She stated that she is a clerk and one of the trustees of a Baptist church, and words of hers spoken in a public meeting have been the means of spiritual good to other women. She wished to know what Paul means in I. Timothy 5:9-14; whether it means that widows ought not to be received into the church under sixty years of age. She and her sister are both widows, and (of course) are not sixty years of age; and she asks whether the church did wrong in receiving them as members. The answer is, that the apostle is there not speaking of church-membership, but of a sort of arrangement, concerning which we have no other information, by which certain selected widows were supported by the church, and devoted themselves to caring for the poor and the sick. No widow was to be enrolled in this list unless she was at least sixty years old, and in her previous life had shown herself well suited to the duties they were expected to perform.

The letter proceeds: "I can not reconcile Christ's treatment and mention of women with Paul's. I think Paul must have written there his biased opinion, instead of the direction of the Spirit. Women were last at the Cross and first at the sepulchre of Christ. He spoke to one first after his resurrection. John gives a

a whole chapter, nearly, of Christ's conversation with Mary and Martha, and not one word of what Lazarus said. Why are so many things that women said and did recorded, if they were to be so silent on religious matters?" Some persons will think it passing strange that this should be presented as an argument in favor of women's speaking to mixed assemblies, notwithstanding the express and repeated prohibition of the Apostle Paul. Yet substantially the same argument has been vehemently urged by writers of both sexes, and even in a book, by a minister. As to there being no record in John XI. of conversation with Lazarus, it will occur to some readers that Lazarus, during the Master's conversation with his sisters, was in his tomb. The real importance of this extract lies in the cool assumption that Paul was not inspired in his prohibitions! That cuts at the root of Christianity. The writer of the letter is here quite logical, and shows the real tendency of the whole movement she is defending. I have scarcely ever conversed with any advocate of women's speaking in mixed assemblies who did not, sooner or later, deny the Apostle Paul's inspired authority in this matter. That is the very reason why the question is of so great importance; and it must be my excuse for making extracts from a private letter.

From the best information accessible, it may be stated that the present active movement in favor of the practice we are discussing originated among the Methodists, especially in the Northwest. Mr. Wesley's "class-meetings" consisted of a small number of persons of both sexes, under a "class-leader," and in these meetings, which were strictly private, the female members were expected to speak of their recent experiences, as well as the men. This is probably the historical origin of the claim now made in some Baptist churches, that women may properly "testify." The practice of women's speaking in mixed assemblies was greatly strengthened by the zealous efforts of the "Women Crusaders" for temperance in Ohio and elsewhere, some twenty years ago, and afterward by the Women's Christian Temperance Union. It is well known that Quakers have always encouraged women to speak in the public meetings when they felt moved thereto; also that Universalists and Unitarians have sometimes encouraged women thus to speak—those bodies not acknowledging that they owe strict and minute obedience to the requirements of the New Testament. A good many Congregationalists now hold loose views of inspiration, and some of them have been ready to set aside the apostle's prohibition. In the zealous and honored temperance work

above mentioned some Baptist ladies have united, through fervent sympathy with the objects, and usually without consideration as to the exact requirements of Scripture. More recently, some of the women's missionary societies have allowed the presence of men at their meetings, but other societies have strictly excluded men, the latter class still showing a desire to obey the Scripture prohibitions. It can not be questioned that the great majority of Baptist ladies who have been gradually drawn into this movement for women's speaking in mixed assemblies, have been influenced by unreflecting sympathy, or by mere considerations of supposed expediency. Even one of our most admirable Baptist newspapers a few years ago said, with reference to this matter, "We must regard exigencies as well as exegesis." The writer did not weigh the full meaning of his words.

A justly honored Baptist pastor was not long ago reported as saying (in substance) that he did not want to hear so much about texts on this subject; the thing does good, and that was enough for him. The Paedobaptists do much good. Many devout Romanists gain good and do good by holding up a crucifix to dying eyes; does that make the practice scriptural and justifiable for Baptists? Why will not Baptist people see the gross inconsistency of vehe-

mently asserting the necessity of conforming to the New Testament in regard to church membership and the ordinances, while they coolly disregard express prohibitions in respect to another matter? Will our honored brethren and sisters please open their eyes, take their latitude and longitude, and see which way they are drifting?

"Ah, but," some will say, "this is a great movement, and it is going to grow. Shall we let the Methodists get all the benefit of it?" Grant for the sake of argument that it seems expedient, and will give denominational power. We let the Methodists get all the benefit of infant baptism, of Arminian theology, of centralized organization, because we think these things are contrary to the New Testament. If Baptists are going to abandon New Testament teachings for the sake of falling in with what they regard as a popular movement, the very reason for their existence has ceased.

It is a comfort to know that the great majority of Baptist women in our country as a whole are still distinctly opposed to this practice. Such is the case almost universally in New England (if I am correctly informed), quite generally in the Middle States, and with very few exceptions throughout the South and Southwest. Is it too much to hope that our excellent Baptist ladies who have fallen in

with the movement in some parts of the country will stop while they can, will exclude men from their women's meetings, will decline to join in temperance addresses to assemblies composed of both men and women?

One other point. Some will say, "If we undertake to carry out such strict views, they will be found to conflict with the work which some women are almost everywhere doing as teachers of male Bible classes, as professors in co-educating colleges, and sometimes as missionary workers in foreign fields." I shall not now inquire how far these practices conflict with the apostle's prohibition. But if any of them do thus conflict, then instead of being relied on as precedent to set aside the apostle's authority, they ought themselves to be curtailed and corrected.

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