

Women in the Assembly

What is the authorized behavior paradigm?

By Aaron Curtis

Ground Rules

Since we will be dealing with the original language, we must establish some “ground rules” regarding translation of the original text, and how that can affect our exegesis.

Accuracy vs. Tradition

When it comes to translation of religious documents in particular, linguistic accuracy and tradition can often come into conflict. This happens not because anything in the text changes, but because our languages are living things. They shift, morph, and flow with the tides of time, and because of this, new translations are periodically required in order to accommodate the new linguistic iterations. This also happens when religious prejudice and tradition of centuries past, perhaps unknown to us, are perpetuated by new bodies of translators, simply because “that’s the way we’ve always done it.” We will provide two examples of this:

- ➔ ἐκκλησία - This word is often translated as “church.” The word church comes from the Middle English *chirche*, which in turn comes from the Old English *cirice*, which in turn is ultimately derived from the Late Greek κυριακόν, which means “belonging to the lord” or “belonging to the master.” While this may be a decent *description of who is intended*, it is not an accurate *translation of the term*. The word ought to be translated as “assembly,” for that is its most precise equivalent. One may now ask, “I was always told that this meant the ‘called out?’” This is not precisely true. It is derived from the Greek verb ἐκκαλέω, which is a combination of the preposition ἐκ, which means “out of” or “from among,” and the verb καλέω, which means “to call.” The word was an extremely common word in the Hellenistic world, and has its origins in their civic organization. The Hellenistic world is known as the birthplace of Western democracy, and rightly so. Whenever a town or city-state needed to decide an important matter, a crier would go throughout the town issuing a call, for any who would be part of the decision making process, to assemble in the forum or amphitheater to debate the issue and reach a decision. This was also the practice to gather people for religious festivals and entertainment events. We must also remember that in language, as in everything else, any given thing is more than just the sum of its parts. Thus, the verb ἐκκαλέω, while containing the preposition “out” and the verb “to call,” can be more precisely defined, when found together in this form, as “to summon.” Accordingly, those who responded to the call were called the ἐκκλησία, which is most accurately translated as assembly, as Webster’s dictionary defines assembly as: a company of persons gathered for deliberation and legislation, worship, or entertainment. Assembly is the perfect translation of the

word ἐκκλησία. Proper understanding of the origin and application of the word also helps us understand its meaning within a religious context, as those who have voluntarily assembled to answer the summons of the Word and His prophets, precluding any Calvinistic interpretations.

- ➔ βαπτίζω - We simply translate this word as “to baptize,” and its derivations βάπτισμα and βαπτισμός as “baptism.” Neither of these are true English words. This practice arose because those who were initially translating the Bible into English and Latin were not practicing true βάπτισμα, and to translate this with full precise accuracy would expose the inadequacies in their religious practice. The word literally means “to wash,” with immersion being the implied method. Other words were used to indicate washing by other means. We must now ask ourselves the important question: Why do we use a completely fabricated word, which was created to excuse disobedient practices, when a perfectly suitable genuine English word exists? βάπτισμα should be translated as *washing*, with a possible footnote (translator’s choice) to indicate that this is washing by immersion, because there is no single word in the English language which is a direct and precise equivalent.

Context Rules All

When dealing with translation from one language to another, we face the reality that a word in one language has several possible meanings or equivalents in the other. This goes both ways. A Greek word could have several possible English equivalents, or several different Greek words could be encapsulated by one English concept. We also have to face the fact that some words simply have no direct equivalent at all which fully explain all the subtleties included in the original concept, as is the case with βάπτισμα. In instances such as these, we must let the context rule our choice. This is the key to accurate and precise translation when exact equivalents do not exist. Here are two examples, one of a word, and the second of a grammatical concept:

- ➔ ἀνὴρ - This word means “man,” but in the sense that specifically indicates the male gender, whereas ἄνθρωπος refers to a non-gender-specific human being. However, Greek also did not have a word for husband (or wife), so it used ἀνὴρ and γυνή (woman) to refer to someone’s husband (or wife). An example of this is found in John 4, during Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus, after discussion about worship and discipleship, tells the woman, “Bring me your ἄνδρα (accusative singular of ἀνὴρ).” What He means is, “bring me your man.” I say this because Jesus himself reveals intimate knowledge of her personal relationships, and knows very well that she is not married. Connecting this request with verses 17 and 18, and keeping in mind that He just finished discussing discipleship, shows us that Jesus wishes first to address the gross sexual immorality in her life. He tells her, “You have had five ἄνδρας (accusative plural ἀνὴρ, this word is intended to be “men”), and the one you are with now is not σου ἀνὴρ (lit. “your man,” but should be read as “your husband”). What you have said is true.” This is in response to her claim, “I do not have a[ν] ἄνδρα (she thinks he means “husband,” and uses the word in that sense here, to which Jesus responds as He does).” One way Greek would often indicate whether a spousal relationship was intended by inserting a personal

possessive adjective, or a genitive case personal pronoun or name to indicate whose spouse is being discussed. Thus, the main point of this discussion is intended to be a follow-up on her request to receive this “living water” He describes. His response, then, essentially becomes, “If you really want to be my disciple, we’ve got to clean up your personal life. You either need to marry the man you’re sleeping with, or cut off the relationship altogether. Bring him here so we can discuss it.” His intent in having her bring her man to Jesus is for the Master to sort out the problems in their lives. These three verses in John 4 (verses 16-18) show us how Jesus himself used ἄνθρωπος to achieve a variety of different meanings within a single discussion, even a single sentence.

- ➔ The second example of context determining translation choice I would like to bring up is the use of what is called the genitive case. In Greek, a word’s function in a sentence is not determined by word order, as it is in English and in other Germanic languages. Indeed, word order in Greek is so flexible as to mean essentially nothing. Instead, they change the last few letters of a noun, to indicate the appropriate “case” the noun is taking. We call this process “declension.” The nominative case is generally used for the subject of a clause. The accusative case is generally used to indicate that something is the direct object of a predicate. The dative case is used to refer to an indirect object, and the genitive case generally refers to possession. However, there are other uses for all four cases. There is the predicate nominative, for example. Greek also takes nouns, shifts them into the accusative case, and uses the accusative case noun as an adverb which modifies a predicate instead of being an indirect object (see use of δωρεάν in Romans 3:24 to mean “giftly”). In 1 John, there is a phrase repeated constantly: ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ (lit. “the love the god”). ἀγάπη is found here in the nominative case, and θεοῦ is in the genitive. The use of the genitive case here is what is called the “plenary genitive.” This means that it means many things at once. We are often told to use “keywords” when translating cases into English, and although I generally dislike keywords for the genitive case in particular, in this case, the keyword “of,” which is the traditional keyword for genitive, is perhaps the best way to render this passage. Keeping in mind the greater messages and themes for 1 John, we begin to understand that what John intends by “the love [of] God” here is, in fact, three things. Here, it means God’s love for us (subjective use of genitive), our love for God (objective genitive), and a third meaning: God’s love living inside us (us loving other people the same way God does). The simple way of translating this phrase, using the general rule of “genitive equals possession” would have us translate this as “God’s love,” which is an incomplete understand of the rich depth and meaning behind this simply profound phrase. Once again, we must allow context to rule our translation choice.

Now that we have established a few basic and chiefly important rules for translating terms and phrases, let us delve now into the heart of the intent of this analysis: *What are women allowed to do in our assemblies, specifically with regard to speech?*

The Guiding Text

Although we will be examining 1 Corinthians 11 & 14, I always prefer to find a single verse, if possible, which encapsulates the entirety of Biblical teaching on a given subject, and use that as a starting point, bringing in other texts only to further illustrate and verify the statements offered in the foundational verse. To that end, we will deal first address 1 Timothy 2:12, and use that as our guiding text for the duration of this study. This verse perfectly contains all that the Bible says about what women should not be doing with regard to speaking in the assembly. I will provide the Greek text, along with an interlinear translation (work is original to me), followed by a true translation into English (once again, work is original to me).

διδάσκειν	δε	γυναικί	οὐκ
to teach publicly	and/but	[a] woman	no/not
ἐπιτρέπω,	οὐδε	αὐθεντεῖν	ἄνδρὸς,
I permit	nor/also not	to exercise power/ authority over	[a] man
ἀλλ'	εἶναι	ἐν	ἡσυχία.
but/yet	to be	in	silence/peace

Translation: I do not permit [a] woman to teach publicly or exercise authority over [a] man, but [she is] to be in silence.

Note my translation of οὐδε as “or.” That is because this word is a combinative negation. What that means is that the two actions (διδάσκειν and αὐθεντεῖν) being forbidden here are, by means of οὐδε, being linked into a single concept. **This single behavior of teaching publicly in an authoritative manner is what is being forbidden.**

As stated earlier, this single text serves to teach us everything about what the Bible says regarding the ways in which women are forbidden to speak in our assemblies. With the foundation firmly laid, we can now move into an exposition of the key verses, words, and phrases of 1 Corinthians 14 & 11.

1 Corinthians 14

Key Verses and Context

The key verses of this text for this particular issue are verses 26-40. The context of this section must guide our understanding of all that is contained herein. This particular chapter of 1 Corinthians is discussing a certain kind of assembly that, frankly, we do not have today. Pay close attention to the words of v. 26, “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, **a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation**. Let all things be done for building up.” The Holy Spirit, through Paul, is referring to a special kind of assembly in which the Word of God was being **miraculously revealed** to the assembly. Keep in mind that in chapter 13, he was discussing the appropriate use of miraculous gifts. The same thoughts are continued here, only transitioned into direct examples instead of general attitudes. We have no such assemblies today. However, the principles guiding general behavior here are good principles to use to guide ourselves in our own worship assemblies today, as there are several common elements, and the basic premise of why we are gathered is roughly the same: the praise and glorification of God, and the proclamation of His Word, although for us this latter bit happens in a patently non-miraculous fashion.

Also, pay close attention, again, to verse 26, although this time the emphasis will be on the last sentence: “...**Let all things be done for building up.**” Also, in verse 40, “**But all things should be done decently and in order.**” The primary principle being laid down here is that, when we assemble to hear and study the Word of God, we should do things in an orderly fashion, with structure and clarity. **This is the main point of this passage!** The instructions regarding women in the assembly is only a part of this greater message, albeit an important part. The particular didactic construction he uses here is called an “envelope.” This happens when a speaker/author begins and ends a section of his speech/writing with the same thoughts. What this tells us is that everything in between these two echoed statements discusses that singular issue, hence the strong assertion regarding the main point of verses 26-40. This particular construction was something that the ambassador Paul was apparently very fond of using, as he uses it in nearly all of his letters.

The Instructions Regarding Women

The main verses here are 33b-34. They read, in the English Standard Version, as follows: “As in all the [assemblies¹] of the saints, the women should keep silent in the [assemblies]. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.” There are a few words here that need defining. We will be dealing in

¹ The word in the ESV is actually churches in both instances, but for reasons previously discussed, I will be using “assemblies,” as the word found here is the plural of ἐκκλησία.

depth with the words that are translated “to speak,” “to remain silent” and “be in submission.”

- ➔ λαλεῖν - This is the present active infinitive form of λαλέω, and is accurately translated as “to speak.” It is imperative that we give a proper contextual definition of this word, as it has the same flexibility in Greek as it does in English. We understand that there are a multitude of possible ways we can use the word “to speak,” and some of them, now, do not even technically include speech (chatting online is often described as “speaking,” however in some cases no vocal speech is ever used). When the President gives his State of the Union address, he is speaking. When a family shares a conversation over dinner, they are speaking. When a commissioned officer in the military is issuing orders to his subordinates, he is speaking. What we understand is that these are all different forms of speaking, and are not exactly the same action. The same flexibility is possible in Greek, so we must ask ourselves: What kind of speaking is he referring to? To find this, go back to verse 26, and read the things he lists. He is speaking directly to people who have miraculous gifts involving the revelation of God’s Word. He is directly referring to actions that could be described as public teaching (διδάσκω) and the exercise of authority over others (αὐθεντέω), as they are getting up in front of the assembly, and proclaiming the Word to the entire host. Thus, the kind of λαλέω being forbidden here is exactly what 1 Timothy 2:12 forbids.
- ➔ σιγάτωσαν - This is the present active infinitive of σιγάω and can be translated as “to be silent,” “to be still” or “to hold one’s peace.” I prefer the last of these, as I believe the proper contextual definition of this word is given by contrasting it with the previous word. Also, keep in mind, to whom is Paul directly speaking here? He is speaking to Spirit-gifted prophets of God. Thus, the commandment σιγάτωσαν here means, simply, not to exercise those gifts at this time. It means “to hold one’s peace” and not λαλεῖν (to speak). We can see here that this is the intended definition clearly, as he follows up with the next commandment, that women are to:
- ➔ ὑποτασθήσονται - Let them place themselves in submission (third person present active imperative of ὑποτάσσω). This is a clear commandment regarding the role of authority and who is to possess it. Keep in mind that Corinth was a...different...city. The main deity of Corinth was Aphrodite, and thus, her priestesses would have been the main religious influence in the city, and the women who came out of this particular pagan cult would have been used to wielding authority. There were undoubtedly some of these women in the assembly of saints here in Corinth. Thus, the great message of Paul regarding women here in 1 Corinthians 14 is really directed to the ex-priestesses of Aphrodite, and says, “Things here are different from what you are used to! Even if you have been given gifts of revelation by the Holy Spirit, you are not to use them in a public assembly! You are to use them in private! Women may not teach publicly on religious topics!”

This brings us to the next major text in 1 Corinthians:

Chapter 11

It is my assertion that this text deals not with women in a public assembly, but with women exercising the same gifts discussed in chapter 14 in a more private, intimate setting.

It's about Marriage

Take note of verse 5: the fact that he mentions women prophesying at all absolutely has to mean that this is not a public assembly, because chapter 14 clearly prohibits them from doing this in that environment. Therefore, it becomes necessary for us to look at this as a different environment. Also, we must pay careful attention to what is being discussed here. Remember: γυναίη and ἀνὴρ can mean wife and husband just as they can mean female person and male person. Point: Paul brings up women wearing a “veil” or “covering” over their head. This was the practice in the Greco-Roman world by which a woman would indicate her marital status. If a woman wore a covering over the top of her head, she was married. For a woman to walk around with her head “uncovered” was to indicate that she was available for marriage, or even possibly openly sexually available.

The fact that Paul brings up practices that directly indicate a woman's marital status, as well as his reference to the first man and woman as a married couple (verses 7-9, emphasis on verse 9 and why woman was made: as a “suitable helper” for man, directly indicative of marriage relationship) tells us that the primary intended definitions of ἀνὴρ and γυναίη in this text are husband and wife, respectively.

One of the primary points of this text then becomes: if a woman is married, she dishonors her husband whenever she dresses or behaves as if she is unmarried. The cultural aspect of wearing a covering over the top of a woman's head may not apply today, but perhaps an equivalent would be: never walk around without your wedding ring on.

The Second Issue

There is also something else happening here which ties into the physical aspect of the covering and the use of prophecy. Paul has, here as well as other places, set up the general chain of authority in a marriage relationship. It can be simplified as God is over man, and man is over woman. The chain of transmission of the Word of God happens from Father, to Son, to Holy Spirit, to man, to woman. This is where the covering comes in.

By wearing the covering over her physical head, she is also “covering,” “hiding,” or “obscuring” her metaphoric head (the same word, κεφαλή, is used in both senses in this very chapter), thereby temporarily removing him from the chain of transmission. This, then, symbolizes a direct connection to the Holy Spirit, whereby she receives her

temporary authority to prophesy to her husband in the home. As soon as the use of this miraculous gift is over, however, the chain reverts back to default, with the woman in subjection.

Again, this cannot possibly be talking about the use of these gifts in a public assembly, as those actions are directly forbidden in 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14.

Women Speaking Publicly: Can It Ever Be Done?

Yes. In fact, it is commanded for women to teach publicly and to speak publicly.

Singing

There are two texts in which Paul deals with women teaching publicly and speaking publicly in an encouraging, even demanding, manner, and they both happen within the context of singing in an assembly. Thus, women are actually commanded to publicly teach, and to publicly speak, in our worship assemblies. Let us direct our attention to Ephesians 5:18-21:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

The word here which is translated as “addressing” is λαλοῦντες (the present active participle of is λαλέω, which in English is “speaking”). This is a corporate command to all of us. What makes this acceptable is the fact that when we all sing to one another, we are not exercising authority over one another. The only one doing this is the one leading the hymn (as in 1 Corinthians 14:26). Rather, we are all “submitting to one another.” This corporate submission thus authorizes the woman speaking in this manner.

A like passage is found in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” The word translated as “teaching” here is the word διδάσκοντες, which means “publicly teaching.” Again, as this is a corporate act of worship in which we are all serving each other, there is no exercise of authority associated with those who are singing in the audience.

Bible Classes

If one carefully examines the content and structure of our Bible classes, one can observe that they have more in common with congregational singing than they do with listening to a sermon. In these classes, we are all submitting to, serving, and edifying

one another by means of our comments, questions, and observations. Thus, if a woman makes a comment in a Bible class, it is no different than her singing in our worship service. She is not ἀὐθεντοῦντες ἀνδρός (exercising authority over a man). She is, however, forbidden from teaching the class if there are men in the audience, just as she is from leading a hymn (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:26).