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Does the Bible really say women should not speak?

It is one of those myths in society that, on the one hand, the New Testament in the Bible says a woman shouldn't speak in Church, but on the other hand that same society is then ignoring other letters written by the same person that are in the same New Testament! Even ignoring parts of the very same letter!

This is where we have to see that St Paul is writing different things to different Churches because of what is happening in those different churches is also different. St Paul is not contradicting himself at all, but replying to a letter from that Church and dealing with an entirely different problem.

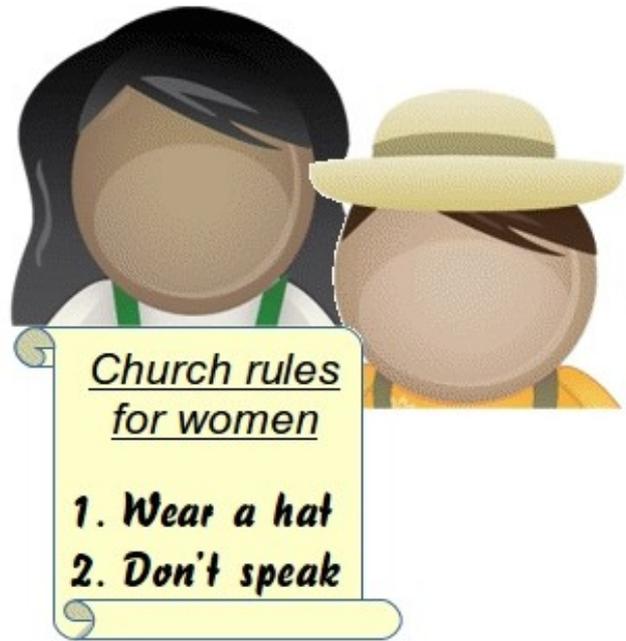
St Paul also writes about head coverings and, in this case, there is a translation difficulty between the original Koine Greek language and the English language because this happens to be one of the few words that doesn't translate properly.

St Paul in his letters makes clear that all members of the Church are indispensable, all members are different, all members are responsible, and all members of the Church are equal. At no point is there any text saying this is either for a man or for a woman. These statements apply fully to both. (*Professor John Drane has a clear section on apparent sexism in his book "Introducing the New Testament" on page 386*)

In St Paul's letters to the Church in Corinth, and again in St Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus, St Paul describes gifts that Christianity brings to people and at no point at all does St Paul say that the gifts are only available to men. All positions in the Church were open to all people. Indeed if we examine the greeting St Paul sends to many people at the end of the letter to the Church in Rome St Paul even names women amongst the apostles (see Romans chapter 16), so from top to bottom the position you have in the Church of the New Testament has nothing to do with your sex.

The oddity then is in St Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth, the very same letter, where St Paul seems to say that women should be silent.

It is important to understand that what was happening in the Church in Corinth was not identical to what was happening in the Church in Ephesus, or to what was happening in any other Church to which St Paul was writing, and we can discern instead that they were all actually asking different questions. However, this is the same St Paul. St Paul does not contradict himself but is indeed answering different questions.



As the text of the letter clearly says “...*Now for the matters you wrote about...*” (1 Corinthians chapter 7 verse 1) so St Paul is clearly replying to a letter (that we don't actually have) from the Church in Corinth. So it is all about what is happening in Corinth and the questions that they asked.

So in the first letter to the Church in Corinth, we read in 1 Corinthian chapter 14:

³⁴Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

In the same letter St Paul writes in chapter 11 at verse 5:

⁵ But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. ⁶ For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.

Notice first that in chapter 11, of the very same letter, women pray and prophesy in Church. Have you ever tried prophesying in silence, or praying together with others in silence? So St Paul is not saying that women should always be silent. We will look at the issue of head covering shortly – but for the moment it is important to notice that St Paul writes in one place that women should be silent and, in the very same letter, St Paul writes about activities in which women cannot possibly be silent. This is the same St Paul and he is not actually contradicting himself at all.

We need to remember that some people have written to St Paul as St Paul himself tells us in the reply-letter and we sometimes have to work out what that missing letter asked about by looking at St Paul's answers to the letter from the Corinthians.

In the book of Acts we read a lot about St Paul visiting Synagogues as well as early Churches. Some of these Synagogues had traditions that were also present in the house Churches. Even today if you are lucky enough to be invited for a meal in an arabic household, the women will eat in one room and the men will eat in another. Remember also that the *agape* meal was part of the service and was part of what is communion (see 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 23 to 26).

In a synagogue and in many early churches the area for women is separate to the area for men. So in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 St Paul is almost certainly writing about gossiping, and that the Church should not ever engage in gossip. Nor is this actually just words against women. To gossip is wrong whether we are talking about men or about women. In 1 Corinthians chapter 14 the whole chapter contains instructions both for men and for women indicating when it is good to speak and when it is best to be silent, it is not just about women!

In the end, to instruct based upon 1 Corinthians 14, whilst ignoring the rest of the same letter is just sexism. It is wrong.

Now to the matter of head-coverings. In the same section of 1 Corinthians 14 St Paul writes about a head covering for women but that is almost, but not quite, what the original Koine-Greek word means.

Firstly, and importantly hygiene was naturally not the same 2000 years ago as it is now, and things like nits in hair were a common problem. For men to have a bald head is not seen as an oddity but surprisingly normal. Men do often lose hair earlier than women but, irrespective of that, one of the responses to nits, and similar infestations in your hair, was to shave your head.

The original Koine greek word used in the letter is *katakaluptomai* (κατακαλύπτομαι). The word means to cover one's head, but it does not say with what. Indeed there is a reasonable case for suggesting long hair covers your head and you only need an extra covering if you have a shaven head. As noted you could have a shaven head for an entirely sensible reason. The problem here is that we must acknowledge that we don't actually know for certain. If a woman enters a Church wearing a hat then we have no reason at all to question it. She is being respectful, and that is all that matters. If a woman with a head of hair enters a Church we, equally, have no reason at all to question it. She is being respectful, and once again that is all that matters. What matters is respect, and that is it.

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