

Women Pastors and Mistaken Appeal to “Prophecy”

The debates about women pastors in the LCA have also been muddled by five assumptions about prophecy in the early church. First, it is often assumed that St Paul contradicted himself. It is alleged that 1 Corinthians 11 Paul says that women may prophesy in church, but that in 1 Corinthians 14 he says that they may not. The blue smoke about an alleged contradiction moves some to allege that Paul was not consistent, and that we can base no practice today on his words.

Secondly, it is argued that, because St Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14 that “all may prophesy”, therefore women may prophesy in worship assemblies.

Thirdly, it is sometimes assumed that in 1 Corinthians 14:33-39 “speak.” refers only to prophesying and speaking in tongues.

Fourthly, it is assumed that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 refers only to prophesying in church assemblies.

Fifthly, in the discussion prophecy is often not correctly defined.

In reply, first, Paul was not so naive as to contradict himself. We should reject the attempt to avoid the Lord’s command that women should be silent in the churches (in 1 Cor 14:33-38) by arguing that in 1 Corinthians 11:5 women were permitted to prophesy in public worship. Does Paul really say that? It is not permissible to argue from an “If” when it is followed by a deprecatory statement, or from “Everyone who” when it is followed by a negative or deprecatory statement, that such and such may legitimately occur when the circumstances are different. St Paul is saying two things. The first is that it is dishonourable for a woman to prophesy with head uncovered (1 Cor 11, on the basis of custom). The second is that to speak in an individual role while the rest listen is forbidden to women in church assemblies (1 Cor 14, on the basis of a commandment of the Lord). Examine this parallel case. If a teacher says “Any boy who rides his bike without a helmet during the lunch hour will be punished”, no one should assume that therefore riding a bike without a helmet after school is permitted. Paul has said, “Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head. For that is one and the same thing as if her head were shaved.” It should not be assumed from this that a woman might prophesy in church if her head was covered. Why? Because Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 rules out individual speaking by all woman in church assemblies. That included prophecy in church.

It is wrong to assume that “speaking” included joint saying of the Lord’s Prayer, for example. It is wrong to assume that “silence” in 1 Cor 14 prohibits even a sneeze! The prior context in 1 Corinthians 14:26-33 indicates a kind of speaking in which one speaks and the rest listen. The fact that St Paul says, “*Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head*” (in 1 Cor 11:5) does not permit a deduction that women actually were permitted to pray aloud and individually prophesy in public worship. The silence (v.34) means not speaking at all in that kind of way. The fact that “come together” is used in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 does not mean that a church context may be imported back into verses 2-16.

Secondly, The point that Paul is discussing in each part of 1 Corinthians 14 should be kept in view. It is not permissible to argue that, because Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:31 that “all” may prophesy in turn, therefore women may also prophesy. When Paul wrote, in 1 Corinthians 14:5 “I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more that you prophesy” he was not referring specifically to the assembled church. Paul wrote, in v.23-24, “Therefore, if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and those who are uninformed or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is judged by all.” Here his point is what is understandable and edifying. If all were speaking in tongues, an unbelieving visitor would assume that they were out of their minds. So the phrase “If all prophesy” should not be used to negate v.33c-40.

In fact, Paul’s basic regulation is that even prophecy in a church assembly should be restricted to “two or at the most three.” He also wrote, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who is sitting by, let the first keep silent” (1 Cor 14:29-30). There is a contrast to be observed between “all” in v.31 (“For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be encouraged”) and “the women” in v. 33c-34: (“As in all the churches of the saints, let the women be silent in the churches, for it is not permitted to them to speak”). Paul makes an exception to “all”, namely, “the women.” The reason is not that they are incapable or less gifted, but that they are women. The reason lies in “the Law” (verse 34) or in what some refer to as “the order of creation.” 1 Timothy 2 makes this explicit. It is a reminder to the church of all times that Adam was created first, and Eve was deceived first

Thirdly, in 1 Corinthians 14:26 St Paul extends his discussion beyond prophecy and speaking in tongues, to “a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.” The discussion goes beyond

prophecy and tongues here.

Fourthly, the assumption in some translations that 1 Corinthians 11:2.16 is limited to a service of worship cannot be sustained. The technical term “come together” belongs in the next section, about the Lord’s Supper.

Fifthly, it should be borne in mind that, as the office of apostle ceased with the apostolic age, prophecy, which also included foretelling the future and new revelation, also did. The church today no longer has either apostles or prophets.

Moreover, the fact that the Holy Spirit in His freedom had imparted His gift of prophecy to people did not give unrestricted licence to use those gifts beyond prescribed order. The context specifically says that persons who spoke had the duty to exercise their wills to regulate what they were doing. We see that in St Paul’s principle right in the context, “And the spirits of prophets are subordinate to prophets” (1 Cor 14:32). That principle applied to prophetesses as well. Since there was always the possibility of false prophecy or wrong use of prophecy, all prophets were subordinate to the control of other prophets. Because of Paul’s command, which is also the command of the Lord (v.33-40) for women not to speak in a leading way while the rest listened in the churches, a prophetess had to restrict her gift of prophecy to private, non-church, contexts.