

# All Christians Speak in Church: What Does This Mean for Sisters?

Every Christian is a mouth for the Holy Spirit, just as every Christian is a pair of hands for the Holy Spirit. Not all our mouths are gifted the same way, just as not all our hands are gifted the same way. Still, the New Testament strongly indicates that when Christians gather as a church, every believer has a role in speaking thoughtful words to build the church. Hebrews 10 and 1 Corinthians 12-14 make this clear.

What are the implications for how we think about church life and church services? For many churches, Sunday services feature only a few people speaking while the rest listen. (The rest of us may open our mouths in congregational singing or Scripture reading, but often one person has selected those songs and readings.)

We must also wrestle with the implications of texts like 1 Corinthians 14 that mention it being “shameful for a woman to speak in church.” Where and how do sisters exercise their responsibility to use their gifts to build the body with thoughtful words?

I am not addressing the role of pastors. Those called as overseers have special ministry responsibilities. I am talking about the ministry responsibility that applies to every member of the church. All the baptized are to “exhort” one another and build up the body.

This “every-member-ministry” is not some optional extra. It is a core part of church life as described in the Bible. We can be flexible about what happens in a particular service, but if we want robust Christianity, we need every believer to speak.

In this essay I carefully consider Hebrews 10:19-25 and 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14. This latter passage places extreme emphasis on the ministry of every member of the body. It also includes what some take to be the strongest statement against women speaking in church. So, I will spend the bulk of the essay on those chapters in 1 Corinthians. I will also share practical ways that I have seen every-member-ministry incorporated into church life (including for sisters).

## Christians Assemble to “Exhort” (Hebrews 10:19-25)

When I was growing up, Hebrews 10:25 was often used to encourage steady church attendance (“not neglecting the assembling of ourselves together”). But what does this phrase actually call us to? If we simply go listen to a preacher and help sing a few songs would that count as “assembling together”? Let’s take a look. This phrase is part of a lengthy sentence (10:19-25) which is built around three exhortations: “Let us come with a true heart...” (v. 22), “Let us hold fast the confession...” (v. 23), and “Let us consider how to stir up each other to love and beautiful actions...” (v. 24). The phrase “not neglecting to assemble together” is a subpoint that helps explain what it means to deliberately stir up other Christians to love and good works. Here is the outline:

- Let us **consider how to stir up one another...**
  - Not neglecting to assemble
  - Rather exhorting

Your words matter. You are personally responsible to make a deliberate effort to move other believers toward love and noble actions by speaking words of exhortation.

That responsibility may overwhelm some of us, if we don’t consider ourselves to have much to say. But we don’t all have to do it the same way. God has a role that is suited for the way he has made us. I think of the most recent cell meeting held in our home. A brother shared Ephesians 2 which he had memorized as a child. A sister shared stories of grace and a song. Another sister told us she restarted her gratitude journal. These things all count!

What is this thing called “exhortation?” Exhort is a traditional English translation for the verb *parakaleo*. Exhortation (*paraklesis*) is a related noun as is *paraklete* (comforter, helper, advocate). While Romans 12 lists it as a specific spiritual gift, *paraklesis* is a broad term that encompasses the various ways in which we might encourage each other toward love and good works and away from sloth or despair.

Most of us don’t think of ourselves as prophesying. But Paul says we should all be zealous to prophesy. Prophecy results in strengthening, *paraklesis*, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3). As we will see in the next section, Paul’s main reason for emphasizing prophecy is that it involves using one’s mind to speak words that other people will understand and that will benefit them in

their walk with God.

The writers of the epistles engage in *paraklesis*. Peter **exhorts** the elders to shepherd willingly (1 Peter 5:1). Paul **beseeches** believers to present their bodies a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). The author of Hebrews **exhorts** his readers to bear with the word of **exhortation** that is his letter (Hebrews 13:22).

Why should we not neglect assembling together? Because we are striving to stir our fellow believers toward love and good deeds. A main way we do that is with our words. There is no indication that sisters get an exemption from this responsibility. So, unless there are other passages with clear teachings to the contrary, it seems they should join in the exhortation when believers gather together. The verses that some take as forbidding women to exhort in church come at the end of the next passage we will examine.

## All the Baptized Build the Body (1 Corinthians 12-14)

1 Corinthians chapters 12-14 form a single unit in the epistle. Paul tackles “spirit related matters” head-on, primarily the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but also matters of ungodly spirits and of the human spirit. The section concludes with instructions for how church gatherings can reflect God’s intentions for the gifts of the Spirit. It is also in this closing section that we find comments about it being shameful for a woman to speak in church—thus acutely raising the question how the ministry of sisters relates to church services.

Like he does in other sections of 1 Corinthians, Paul brings up a topic, mentions abuses, drills deep into the relevant theology, and then gives practical direction. The section opens with words “now concerning” (*peri de*), “spirit related matters” (*tōn pneumatikōn*) (12:1). Paul’s wrap-up summary statement comes in 14:39-40, “wherefore, brethren, be zealous to prophesy and don’t forbid speaking in tongues: do everything honorably and according to order.”

The section covers a lot of ground. The body needs the differing gifts given to all members. Spiritual manifestation without love is worthless. Prophesying is better than speaking in tongues when the church is together because it builds up other believers. All brethren should bring something to share. Prophets should not hog the floor but keep silence when another is ready to speak. Women (or wives) should keep silence.

This brief synopsis raises an observation and a question. The observation is that every

member's ministry is closely linked with Paul's understanding of spiritual gifts and their purpose. The question is whether sisters get a certain sort of exemption in this department. In 14:26 Paul says, "each one of you, brethren (*adelphoi*)" should have something to bring to church, whether it is a psalm, a prophecy, a word of knowledge, etc. Grammatically, *adelphoi* is masculine plural and is often used generically to refer to a group containing both male and female siblings. Some people take verses 34 and 35 to indicate that it is only the male siblings in God's family who are to bring thoughtful words to church. We will need to consider later whether that is a good interpretation of this passage and what the implications of that interpretation would be.

Let's work systematically through chapters 12-14. Paul begins with a fundamental. Anyone who curses Jesus is not speaking from God's spirit. Speech that proclaims Jesus is Lord comes from the Holy Spirit. The one Spirit, one Lord, and one God give different gifts, different ministries, and different outworkings to different people for the common good (verses 4-11). All who are baptized into Christ are part of his one body, but the different parts exercise different functions.

Each of us must reject the idea that we are not part of the body or that the body doesn't need our gift. By the same token, we cannot tell any other believer that we don't need their gift. God has put together the body to care for and honor each other. There are different functions, and yet there are certain better gifts we should seek (12:12-31).

12:31b-13:13 interposes a sharp reminder that love is far above tongues, knowledge, and prophecy. Those things help us know God in the present time, but they will be superfluous when we see God face-to-face. On the other hand, love endures even when we are face-to-face with God (quite naturally since God is love and love is our greatest command). Spiritual gifts deployed without love are empty mockery.

Paul's goal is not to dampen zeal for Spiritual gifts, but to focus that zeal toward acts of love. We should be zealous for prophecy because it serves to build others up as we thoughtfully speak to them. This results in *paraklesis* and comfort (14:1-3). The reason speaking in tongues is not appropriate in church (without an interpreter) is that we are not using our minds to communicate thoughts to others when we speak in tongues (14:4-14).

There are various views of what "prophecy" is in the New Testament. I can't get into those debates here except to say that Paul makes it pretty clear what the main focus is in this

passage. He is emphasizing prophecy because the prophet's mind is fruitful in communicating insight to others. Other people should be able to understand. Our thinking should be mature rather than childish or undeveloped (14:6-20). Paul expects prophecy to convey such penetrating insight that if an unbeliever or inquirer enters a meeting where everyone is prophesying, they will be "convicted by all" and "the secrets of the heart will be exposed" and they will need to acknowledge that "God is among you." I think we can safely say that such prophecy will stir believers to love and good works.

What does this mean, concretely, for church services? In 14:26-39 Paul gets into details: "brethren, when you come together each one has a song, a teaching, a tongue, a revelation, and interpretation..." Everything is to be oriented toward building up.

Let this sink in.

We go to church so that each of us can use a spiritual gift to build up the body. This is the same thing we saw in Hebrews 10. Going to church is part of a considered effort to stir others up through *paraklesis*. Church services that simply involve listening to a preacher and singing along with songs chosen by a song leader are incomplete. If Sunday mornings don't give space for mutual exhortation, then other forums must be found, whether those are Bible studies, prayer meetings, small groups, or whatever.

When it comes to the church meeting, Paul gives special instructions for three groups: Those who speak in tongues, prophets, and "women." Up to three can speak in a tongue (if there is an interpreter). If there is no interpreter, the one with a tongue is to "**keep silence in church.**" Without an interpreter, he would simply "speak to himself and to God" (14:28), rather than build up the church.

Two or three prophets should speak and the others should evaluate. But if something is revealed to one of the others who is seated, the "first one" should **keep silence**. Presumably this "first one" was the prophet who was standing to speak and Paul is saying, as we might put it, that he should yield the floor to the other person because "you can all prophesy one by one." Nobody monopolizes the floor, and prophets don't talk over each other. They prophesy one at a time so that all can learn and receive *paraklesis* (14:31). "The prophets are subject to the prophets," and "God is not a God of disorder but of peace; as in all the churches of the saints." The warning against disorder (*akatastasias*) implies not mere disorganization, but a state of competition between rivals (compare James 3:16). Paul is not calling for rigid efficiency but for

peace and good listening and dialogue.

The third group told to **keep silence** is “women.” I put the term in quotation marks here because Greek, like German and many other languages, does not use separate words for woman/wife or for man/husband. This makes it a contextual decision whether to translate *gune* as “woman” or “wife”. In this passage there may be reason to suspect married women are particularly in view. More on that below. Paul says it is not permitted for them to speak, rather they should “be subject,” “as the law also says” (14:34). If they wish to learn something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church (14:35).

A couple words to notice in this section: first, women are to “be subject.” This links to Paul’s other statement that the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. It also ties linguistically to the language of order in the passage, as well as reminding us of other epistles that speak of wives submitting to their husbands. Second, women speaking in church is “shameful.” This ties back to Paul’s concerns in 1 Corinthians 11. In the first part of the chapter, he spoke of men disgracing their heads by covering them and of women disgracing their heads by not covering them when praying or prophesying. In the second part of chapter 11 he discussed how failing to share with all at the Lord’s Supper despises the church of God and shames the poor.

Having given these instructions for church gatherings, Paul wraps up the section in verses 36-40. His sharp language brings us back to his opening concerns regarding spirit related matters, where he found it necessary to remind them that no one speaking by the Spirit of God curses Jesus. Paul now asserts the authenticity of his own words. “Did the word of God come from y’all, or was it announced to y’all only? If anyone thinks himself a prophet or a spiritual person (*pneumatikos*), let him recognize the things I write to you as commands of the Lord.” Paul then reiterates his position on gifts. Don’t forbid tongues; be zealous for prophecy.

The final statement of the section is “Let everything be done decently and in order.” The gifts should be exercised without the shame of the women’s speech or the disorder of the prophets talking over each other.

## What Does This Mean for Our Church Services?

It is a glaring fact that our church services often don't place much emphasis on this sort of every-member ministry. Anabaptist and Evangelical services tend to focus on sermons and singing. More traditional liturgies emphasize Scripture reading and the Eucharist. All of these things are important, but we must realize that the every-member ministry of exhortation is also a central element. It is not simply a nice optional extra. In my home congregation, every-member-ministry is built into our schedule in small groups, Sunday schools, biweekly sharing times in church, and voluntary men's and women's accountability groups. Of course, some of it also happens informally in individual conversations. I am not saying we do it perfectly, but we do have actual functioning routines where each brother and sister has the opportunity to build the body with thoughtful words. This is a blessing in the life of the church and in my personal life as I regularly benefit from what sisters and brothers share in these settings

## What Does This Mean for Sisters?

Some understand 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 to forbid women from any form of speaking in church services. This would mean sisters do their exhorting only outside of church services. This would mean that the sisters prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11 were doing it outside of church services and that the instructions in 14:26 for church services apply only to male siblings. ("Each one of you brethren (*adelphoi*) should bring...") The plural form *adelphoi* often applies to both male and female siblings. This reading of 14:34-35 would understand Paul as specifying that when he asks the *adelphoi* to each bring something to the service, he only means the male siblings and sisters are not included.

Others argue that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 warns women against certain forms of speech in church, rather than forbidding them to exhort in church. There are several ideas put forward as to what specific speech Paul has in view here. I believe there is good evidence that Paul is not banning all speech whatsoever, and I think there are some pretty good clues as to what kind of speech he is particularly addressing.

Before I make those arguments, though, let's consider the implications if Paul is categorically ruling out sisters speaking in church services. If sisters cannot exercise their responsibilities for every-member ministry in church services, then they need to do it somewhere else. That is to say. We need other spaces where they exhort and prophesy. Hebrews 10 and 1 Corinthians

12-14 are not going to let them off the hook. In first Corinthians, speaking ministry follows straight from Paul's understanding of the purpose of spiritual gifts, and those spiritual gifts belong, not to men only, but to **all** who are "baptized by one Spirit into one body" (12:13). Chapter 12 emphasizes that God has given different gifts to different people to build up the body. All members of the body are needed. Believers should seek the "greater gifts" (12:31). This chain of thought flows directly into chapter 14. (Chapter 13 is a vigorous parenthesis reminding us that gifts without love are useless, but it does not detract from Paul's concern to use our gift to love others.) Romans chapter 14 unpacks what it means to love others with our spiritual gifts. We do that by speaking thoughtful words they can understand. We build up others by using our mind to speak intelligible words, rather than leaving them in the dark while we speak in a language they don't understand.

The instruction to build others up with thoughtful words flows directly out of the fact that God gives individuals gifts in order to benefit the body. Sisters share with brothers in those gifts. Thus, they also share the responsibility to build the body with thoughtful words. Thus, if they can't do that in church services, they need to do it somewhere else.

## **Evidence Suggests Paul Doesn't Forbid All Speech**

But is Paul forbidding sisters to bring "a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation" to church? There is evidence against this. The first line of evidence is the flow of thought in the passage. 1 Corinthians 14 flows directly out of 1 Corinthians 12. We could call this chapter "How spiritual gifts should work out at church." Paul emphasizes that spiritual gifts are given to each member of the body in chapter 12 and then fleshes out what that means by telling them how to act in church in chapter 14. The emphasis in chapter 14 that all should speak (in turn) is a direct consequence of the emphasis in chapter 12 that all members of the body and all gifts are needed. The practical instructions for church services are the wrap of the whole section, giving the practical upshot of the themes discussed in chapters 12 and 13. It seems to me unlikely, that Paul intends 14:34-35 to mean, in effect, "Well actually only half the members need to speak in church."

Another line of evidence comes from what Paul says "women" should do instead of speaking in church. They should ask their husbands at home if they want to learn something. This only applies to women with Christian husbands. Perhaps, Paul is just speaking of the typical case since most adult sisters were married. But we need to remember the rest of 1 Corinthians as

the context for this letter. In chapter 7, Paul both addressed women with unbelieving husbands and advocated for sisters to choose deliberate singleness over marriage. He is conscious of sisters without husbands to ask, and he does not see the absence of a Christian husband as a malady that Christian women should be desperate to correct.

The broader context of 1 Corinthians provides us with a third line of evidence. When I say the broader context, I don't mean information about Corinth from archaeology or from historical records outside the Bible; rather, I refer to Paul's other letters and to what Acts tells us about the church at Corinth. We have some information about the activities of sisters in the churches Paul worked with. It is possible these activities were all carried out without these sisters uttering a word in church services, but it doesn't seem likely.

Priscilla ministered at Corinth. Acts 18:2 tells us Paul met "a Jew named Aquila" and "his wife Priscilla" and lived with them for a time. This is an ordinary introduction for a married couple: say who the man is and then introduce the lady as his wife (if the lady is mentioned at all). But after this introduction, the order is frequently reversed and they are referred to as "Priscilla and Aquila" (or "Prisca and Aquila") (Acts 18:18, 18:26, Romans 16:3, 2 Timothy 4:19). Only in 1 Corinthians 16:19 and some manuscripts of Acts 18:26 does Aquila's name show up first.

Why is Priscilla often named first? Some have suggested that maybe she came from a higher social status than he did, but I think the more plausible explanation is that she was the more prominent minister of the two. We have a similar example concerning the order of names earlier in Acts. Barnabas was sent to Antioch to help the church there and he recruited Paul to join him. For the first while the duo is referred to as "Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:30, 12:25, 13:2, 13:7). On the first missionary journey Luke begins to refer to them as "Paul and Barnabas" (Acts 13:43, 13:46, 13:50, 15:2, and 15:35). But Luke does still sometimes put Barnabas first, speaking of "Barnabas and Paul" (14:14, 15:12, 15:25 (in a letter from the church at Antioch)). What happened that the order of the names changed? Well, on the missionary journey Paul quickly became the leading figure. Once they were back from the journey among people who knew them, Barnabas would still have seemed more prominent, and his name is sometimes mentioned first. It seems likely to me that Priscilla's name being listed first reflects her role in ministry (as when Priscilla and Aquila explained the way of God to Apollos more perfectly in Acts 18:26).

Paul commends a number of sisters in Romans 16. Phoebe is a "servant of the church at Cenchreae." Cenchreae was a port city near Corinth and Paul is thought to have written

Romans from Corinth. Mary “worked hard for you.” Andronicus (male) and Junia (female) are “notable among the apostles.” for their labors in the Lord. Tryphaena and Tryphosa are “workers in the Lord.” Priscilla and Aquila are Paul’s “fellow workers” (*sunergoi*). When Paul talks about some working hard or being a fellow worker, this is high praise and he expects Christians to acknowledge what they do for the body. 1 Thessalonians 5:12 says to “know” (recognize, acknowledge) those who “work-hard” (*kopiao*) among you and 1 Corinthians 16:16 asks believers to submit to everyone who “fellow-works” and “works-hard.”

Paul commends Priscilla and these other women. Thus we can be sure that, however they labored, their ministry did not conflict with his directives for women in the church. It is possible that their ministry happened only in settings and ways that did not require them to utter a word in a church service, but I find that dubious. When we consider Paul’s words about particular sisters and their labors alongside the other lines of evidence that I have highlighted, I believe we are on solid ground to expect full participation from sisters in every-member-ministry. Sisters, not less than brothers, should be bringing hymns, words of exhortation, and words of prophecy to our church services.

If you are not convinced by these arguments (and I could be wrong), then the first challenge you face is first to define what counts as a “church service” and what does not. The second challenge is to encourage and empower sisters to exhort and labor in the Lord in settings outside of churches services, so that they can continue the legacy of sisters like Priscilla, Mary, and Phoebe.

I don’t think Scripture gives a formula for distinguishing between church services and other times Christians get together. We can probably say that two friends discussing the Bible is not a church service and that when the whole local body gathers to celebrate the Lord’s supper on the Lord’s Day under the direction of recognized elders it clearly is a church service. But much of the life of the church is in between. In my own setting, for example, lay-led small groups are one of the main ways we fulfill the imperative for every-member-ministry in church. I don’t personally feel a need to precisely define where church services start and stop. But if women cannot speak in church, then this becomes a quite important question.

So what speech is Paul forbidding to sisters in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35? Paul is clearly concerned in the passage to prevent disorder and people speaking over each other. He also seems to focus on women with husbands. So, one possibility is that he is addressing women who were disrupting the service by asking questions to their husbands while someone was

speaking and telling them to hold those questions for later at home. My biggest hesitation with adopting this view is that it seems like Paul could have said that more directly if he wanted to instead of invoking subjection, and the law, and the shameful of women speaking in church. But this view does fit quite well with the main concerns of the passage for order and intelligible meetings. It would also reflect a nice parallel with 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34. In that passage, Paul takes the Corinthians to task for desecrating the Lord's supper by the way they consumed the love feast. Some were eating in excess and others were getting nothing. One of Paul's closing admonitions is that if anyone is hungry, they should eat "at home." Paul's point was not that they shouldn't eat at the love feast, but that if they were tempted to eat too much or out of turn at the love feast, they should fill up at home. Paul uses the same language in 14:35, if they want to learn something, ask at home. This doesn't mean women only learn at home; rather Paul is instructing how church should be conducted so that all can learn (14:31). So, in the end I think it is quite possible that Paul is talking about certain women who were disrupting the service.

## **What Then? Practical Possibilities**

I would like to close by describing how sisters build the body with thoughtful words in my own congregation. We are clearly complementarian, in the sense that we do not ordain sisters or assign them to teach the congregation or lead our small groups, but sisters definitely help stir us to love and good works. This does not only happen in informal conversations. Youth sisters are expected to participate in co-ed Sunday school classes while older sisters have segregated Sunday school classes. Sisters contribute to our every other week "prayer praise and testimony" by bringing songs, prayer requests, praise, and lessons they are learning from the Lord. (And of course, sisters have written many of the words in our hymnals.) Our in-home small groups benefit greatly from the voices of our sisters.

The imperative is not that we all structure our church life and church gatherings the same way, it is that we encourage every believer to build the body of Christ with thoughtful words.