

# Views of the Early Brethren Regarding the Scriptural Role of the Sisters in the Assembly

## John Nelson Darby Notes, Letters & Other Darby Writings Letters

### The liberty of speech of the sisters in Bible reading meetings as opposed to church meetings<sup>1</sup>

Two things are forbidden to women, speaking in the assembly and teaching anywhere. This makes the matter to me very simple: **silence in the assembly and never teaching.**

[However],<sup>2</sup> **if a reading meeting be in a private house, and practically a private meeting, sisters are free.** I believe that comeliness will restrain them where brethren are, **but as in a private house they have the liberty of speech.** The moment brethren assemble as such in the Lord's name, then their place is silence; also asking a question, may be, as you say, covert teaching. **A meeting in the meeting room of the assembly takes more or less necessarily the character of a meeting of the assembly, if it is open for all to come.** There are, if there be liberty, many things connected with comeliness which must guide us. "Doth not even nature itself teach you," says the apostle, and everything is beautiful in its place: the women had a lovely one in the gospels, and even in the epistles. They are found clinging round Jesus when the disciples were not, but it is their own place -devoted attachment to Him, not any public teaching. God's order brings more progress than any superiority of intelligence. As to having faith to keep silent, I believe that trusting the Lord could make them to be silent when they fancied they must speak, but it is really a matter of decorum, not of faith. "I suffer not a woman to teach," &c. I believe I have answered all your inquiry as far as I am aware, and I trust the Lord may guide you in spirit and in heart.

Yours very truly in the Lord.

JND  
1874.

The scripture is plain,\* (\*'What is the woman's part at religious meetings?) that it is forbidden to a woman even to ask questions. It is not seemly for angels or men. **If any strangers are allowed to come in who wish it, I should consider it a public assembly; but if it be an individual meeting for any beyond [but] the saints, then it has a private character, and I think the woman's place is as in any other private assembly: only that in divine things, and in Christian women, modesty and a retiring spirit is of great price with God. If it be a regular meeting of the assembly, the woman's part is surely to be silent. In a private meeting, it is merely a question of the modesty that becomes them.** We are called to peace.

JND  
1861

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<sup>1</sup> Subtitles, throughout, are mine to explain the subject matter of the writings.

<sup>2</sup> The transitional, "however," is added to connect the two thoughts.

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## Brethren Periodical: The Bible Student 1883

### Women's participation at Bible reading meetings, and private occasions for prayer and prophesying of women.

**Q. 126 (1). Does Scripture forbid a woman who has her head covered to pray in a prayer meeting? or (2) to ask a question in a Bible reading?** Inquirer.

**A. (1)** A prayer meeting, being usually a **meeting of the assembly, I Cor. xiv. 34 would apply.** It is evident, however, that there are many other more private occasions of prayer to which, I Cor. xi. would refer.

**(2) A Bible reading ought to be free for all to ask questions;** the only limit would be that which propriety would suggest where they are large or public.<sup>3</sup>

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## Lord Congleton (John Parnell): one of the original brothers from Dublin, 1830

### Seeking sister's verbal participation at Bible reading meetings

At Cannes he was able to take part in meetings for Christian fellowship, and at various Bible readings, to which he was always partial, and in which his gracious humility of spirit was wont to shine out with particular lustre. Some who were there spending the winter will remember those opportunities of spiritual profit and blessing with pleasure and with thankfulness. As has been already noticed, Lord Congleton had the happy art at a Bible reading of drawing out the thoughts of others, so that in his hands the reading never degenerated into an address, where all but one were listeners. Every one felt at ease. The weak were encouraged, and the timid helped to unfold what was in their minds, and to bring out their difficulties and perplexities. Thus to be able to help the sheep of the Lord's pasture is no small attainment. It is lowly, patient work, too deep, too self-denying, and too Christlike for any but those who care less for their own gift and its recognition than for the honour of Christ in the blessing of those taught. Our brother's desire was also that all might get the benefit of what each had to contribute, and if one person spoke in an undertone to his neighbour he would immediately pause and say, "Will you let us have your thought, dear brother?" or "dear sister," as the case might be. All felt when he was present that no remark made by the humblest would be despised or overlooked. It was thus he became so great a helper of others in the knowledge of that Book of which he was himself so ardent and prayerful a student. Writing about this time (Feb. 24, 1877) to one whom he was seeking to lead on in the truth, he says, "As to myself, I do not know that I ever was happier. Of late I have been almost daily picking up nuggets of a metal far, far more precious than gold, out of the Holy Scriptures—the book I have been reading daily for more than fifty years, and it seems to get newer instead of older."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Bible Student, Vol. III* (W.B. Horner, London 1883), pg. 127

<sup>4</sup> Groves, Henry, *'Not of the world', Memoir of Lord Congleton* (John F. Shaw & Co., London, 1884), Pg. 108-09

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**J.R. Caldwell, Editor of *The Witness***

**Showing the different requirements between a fellowship meeting and a church meeting where the same brother and sisters are present.**

“The apostle then proceeds in verse 3 to give the mind of God with regard to the relative position of the man and the woman in the assembly...”

“...The Lord Jesus never sought to glorify Himself, but His Father. So the business of the man is to glorify Christ, to unveil or manifest the mind and character of Christ the Head. To show this typically, it is enjoined that in the assembly, which is designed to show forth spiritual and heavenly things, the head of the man shall be uncovered. To observe this is not a mere custom, but an act of deference to the expressed will of a present Lord. Some may say, ‘Is God so particular as to care whether my hat is off or on?’ Yes, God condescends to very little things, and has thought it needful to legislate for it in His Word. It is ours, therefore, simply to obey....But the woman is to have her head covered. Why? Because ‘the head of the woman is the man,’ and on no account is man to be manifested or exalted...”

**“Suppose a few of us believers were sitting round the breakfast table in my house on a Lord’s Day, and that no assembly being in the neighbourhood, we purposed, after breakfast, showing the Lord’s death in the breaking of bread.’ The moment the breakfast is removed, and the bread and wine placed upon the table in the name of the Lord, it ceases to be my table.** As head of the house, the ordering of it was according to my will at breakfast; but now it is ‘the Lord’s Table,’ and everything about it must be ordered and regulated by Him. Though there be only two or three, the ordering of the assembly and everything relating to the keeping of the feast, must be according to the revealed will of Christ. **If, at my breakfast table, the women had their heads uncovered; now, although in the same room and sitting round the same table, the women’s heads must be covered.** This, I repeat, is not a mere custom; it is an act of subjection to the will of the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

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**Brethren Periodical: Bible Treasury Volume 20**

**The prayer and prophesying of women, according to I Cor. 11, exercised not in a church meeting but in a private meeting for prayer and edification**

**The instructions of 1 Cor. 11 I take to be of a different character. There, beyond dispute, women are allowed to pray and prophesy, provided they 'they do it with covered head, ' because of the angels.'** Now this is clearly not in the public assembly, for the same Epistle, as we have seen, expressly forbids it (and no reverent reader of scripture believes that scripture contradicts itself); it must therefore be in meetings of a private nature. **In the early days more than now, saints often got together in an informal way, in private houses and elsewhere, for prayer and edification. To such gatherings, not meetings of the assembly as such, and not of a public character, I conceive the exhortations of 1 Cor. 11 to apply.** This' was resisted, I may remark, by some lately. I trust I have written clearly and given the mind of Lord as revealed. I believe so, but if in any wise there be error, I shall be thankful to be corrected, by whomsoever the Lord may choose. W. W. F.

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<sup>5</sup> Caldwell, J. R., *The Charter of the Church*, Vol. 2, (Pickering & Inglis, Glasgow), Pg. 123-125

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## Brethren Periodical: Bible Treasury Volume 7

### Characteristics of a meeting of saints in a Bible or Scripture Reading

**Q.** What are the distinctive **characteristics of a meeting of the assembly as such**? Should a **scripture-reading** be regarded in this light? **If held stately in a private house, would 1 Cor. 14:34, 35 or 1 Tim. 2:11, render a question from a female invalid? Where does 1 Cor. 11:5, 13 apply?**

**A.** When Christians come together ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ (i.e., as an assembly), there is an entire openness for such action as the Spirit may direct in prayer and singing, blessing and thanksgiving, reading, speaking (subject of course to the regulations of the Lord in 1 Cor. 14). **This is not at all the character of a scripture-reading, whether stated or occasional, at a public meeting-room or in a private house. One point of value in it is to afford an opportunity for questions and explanations which would be out of place in the assembly.** The nature of a meeting depends not on the fact of who are present, but on its aim and character. Thus, a lecture or a preaching of the gospel, like a reading-meeting, might have all the saints of a place present; but its own character is quite unaffected by such a circumstance. **Nevertheless, a social character is, I think, desirable for a scripture-reading, so as to make it expedient, as well as lawful, for a woman to ask a question, if she wished.** There are cases as **when many men are present**, where nature itself would teach her to prefer silence. **1 Timothy forbids not this, but teaching and the exercise of authority. Prophecy (according to 1 Cor. 11 compared with 1 Cor. 14) was lawful for women, not in the assemblies but at home;** where, as I suppose, Philip's four daughters exercised their gift unobtrusively and with decorum. So too Priscilla, with her husband, helped Apollos in private.

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## The Bible Student, Vol. 1 1881

### Head covering of I Cor. 11 applies to public assemblies, not private occasions.

**Q.** 348. Would you please explain **I Cor. xi. 3-15**. (1) Ought a woman always to have some article of clothing on her head? **A.** (1) A woman ought to be covered **in public assemblies**, of which the chapter speaks. (2) Does praying include **giving of thanks at meals**? **A.** (2) Not in this passage at all, which speaks of the custom **in the assemblies** of God (ver. 16). [Pg. 94]

# Things New and Old

C. H. Mackintosh, ed. Charles Stanley, ed. 1881

22. "N.," Truro. If it be an assembly meeting, it should be clearly understood that it is such, and then every woman instructed in the truth would know that God has set her in the place of learning in silence, and that it would be a shame for her to speak. But if it be a social meeting of a few Christians to search the word together, we can see nothing contrary to the word in a woman modestly, and in a subject spirit, asking questions; but the moment she begins to teach, or to usurp authority over the man, she dishonours the Lord. We recommend such meetings to be held in private houses. The Lord be praised for all the help given, you speak of, through our little magazine!<sup>6</sup>

57. "I.," Maryport. In an assembly meeting, scripture forbids a woman to speak. "Let your women keep silence in the churches [assemblies], for it is not permitted unto them to speak," &c. (1 Cor. xiv. 34.) But we do not see how a few gathered around the Bible, in a private house, to study the word, can be called an assembly meeting. It seems to us to partake more of a social gathering, where, as far as we see, there could be no restriction to a sister asking questions, or modestly making remarks, provided she does not teach. About this scripture says, "I suffer not a woman to teach." The grace of God is needed for this, as well as everything connected with our behaviour. It is blessed to know that " He giveth more grace," and that " He giveth grace to the humble."<sup>7</sup>

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## On Sisters saying "Amen" in the Assembly

9. "A. B.," Highbridge. "Amen," in 1 Corinthians xiv. 16, seems to be the expression of conviction, rather than taking part in worship or giving of thanks. No doubt it may be either. But here it has reference to the unlearned, and un-believers, if such come in, and occupy the place of the unlearned. We must not lay down rules for the assembly, but in all things seek the guidance of the ever-present Holy Spirit. We learn here the importance of speaking, or praying, or giving of thanks in the Spirit; and also speaking so as to be understood. This is often overlooked in the assemblies. And surely there can be no objection, for either brethren or sisters, with holy reverence, saying audibly, at the close of a prayer or thanks-giving, " Amen." Silent indifference is most sad. The Lord keep us from this; it is most deadening. We may also conclude that the careless utterance of " Amen" is profane. Oh, for a deeper sense of the presence of the Lord!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mackintosh, C. H., ed., Stanley, Charles, ed. *Things New and Old*, Vol. XXIV, (G. Morrish, London, 1881), pg. 106

<sup>7</sup> Mackintosh, C. H., ed., Stanley, Charles, ed. *Things New and Old*, Vol. XXIV, (G. Morrish, London, 1881), pg. 308

<sup>8</sup> Mackintosh, C. H., ed., Stanley, Charles, ed. *Things New and Old*, Vol. XXVIII, (G. Morrish, London, 1885) pg.194

# Further Distinctions between Assembly Meetings and Bible Reading Meetings as seen among the Early Brethren

## Brethren Periodical: Things New and Old, Vol. XVI 1873

C. H. Mackintosh, Editor

27. "S. C," Melrose. 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35, does not, in our judgment, apply to such a meeting as you describe. We can see no objection to a sister's asking a question at a reading meeting, provided always that the question be not put in such a style as proves that the enquirer is really the teacher.<sup>9</sup>

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## Brethren Periodical: Things New and Old, Vol. XXII 1879

C. H. Mackintosh, Editor

51. Cleethorps. We must recognize the distinction between saints being gathered together as the assembly of God, such as is described in 1 Cor. 14:23, and a few believers who meet to search the word. "If the whole church be come together into one place" would alone be the true assembly meeting; but this, alas, can never take place now, because of the scattered condition of the church. There is therefore, as far as we know, no town on earth where all the Christians in it thus obey the Lord. What best answers to it now is, when any number of Christians in a place are gathered together to the name of the Lord Jesus, and on the ground of the one body according to the Spirit's unity. There may be ten reading meetings in a town going on at the same time, but no one of these could be said to be on the ground of God's assembly; so that it would be a mistake to apply the commandments of the Lord in 1 Cor. 14:29-35, as to women keeping silence, which apply to an assembly meeting, as though they were intended to include every meeting. There is, however, another scripture which speaks in a more general way, and which every godly woman will do well to observe. "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." (1 Tim. 2:11, 12.) This we judge would give sufficient guidance for the conduct of women at a reading meeting.<sup>10</sup>

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## Brethren Periodical: The Bible Student, Vol. I 1881

A. T. Schofield, Editor

**Q. 313.** (1) Please explain why it is said in 1 Cor. 15:5 that Christ was seen of the twelve when there were only eleven at that time. **(2) Does 1 Cor. 11:3-10 apply to a Bible reading in a private house?** If not, what is the breadth of its application, and does the word "head" in v. 5 refer to the man, or what the woman is to cover? J. R.

**A.** (1) There were then only eleven actually living of those who were appointed by the Lord, but Matthias who (Acts 1:26) took the place of Judas as the twelfth, saw Him. (v. 22.) **(2) Verse 5 refers to the woman's head. If a woman prays or prophecies (in public) she is to have her head covered. This does not take place generally in private Bible readings.** The passage appears to contemplate women doing both, not of course to men, (1 Tim. 2:12) but to her own sex. When occupying such a position a man is uncovered, a woman covered.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mackintosh, C. H., ed., *Things New and Old, Vol. XVI*, (G. Morrish, London, 1873) pg. 111

<sup>10</sup> Mackintosh, C. H., ed., *Things New and Old, Vol. XXII*, (G. Morrish, London, 1879), pg. 250-251

<sup>11</sup> Schofield, A. T. ed., *The Bible Student, Vol. 1*, (W.B. Horner, London, 1881), pg. 68

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## Brethren Periodical: Things New and Old, Vol. XXVI 1883

C. H. Mackintosh, Charles Stanley, Editors

37. "G. R.," Yarmouth. As to a sister asking a question at a reading meeting, according to 1 Cor. 14:34, 35, it must be noticed that this scripture, by its full context, refers to a very different meeting than "a reading meeting." We would fully recognize the present ruin of the church, yet is it not sad that, amongst Christians, there should be so few meetings for worship, which answers at all, during the week-days, to this scripture? We believe, if there was real dependence on the Holy Ghost, such a meeting, open for worship or teaching, in real dependence on the Spirit, would be far more profitable than many reading meetings in the assembly; and also reading meetings, of a simple character, in each other's houses, where a sister might be free to ask a question, would be far more profitable than the present larger ones are.<sup>12</sup>

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### Example of Robert Cleaver Chapman

The "spirit of faith" always leads to thanksgiving, and those who had but little acquaintance with Mr. Chapman must have heard him affirm that thanksgiving should be the constant business of the child of God. Often did he ask the questions, Do you count up your mercies? Do your thanksgivings keep pace with them? On one occasion, at a meeting of a few believers, after he had dwelt upon Ephesians v. 19, 20, a spiritually-minded sister said, "I do give thanks; but why am I not always singing and making melody in my heart to the Lord?" The answer was, "If I be not giving thanks always for all things to God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the cause must be that I have some little concern of my own in a corner." By this he meant that if we walk in true fellowship with the Father and the Son, by the Spirit, and recognise that all our matters are ordered by our Heavenly Father in perfect wisdom and love, we must be giving thanks; but if we treat our matters simply as our own, seek to deal with them by our own wisdom, have regard to their results only as they concern ourselves, and fail to bring God into them all, in the spirit of faith, with the assurance that He controls them for His own glory and our truest blessing, our harp will soon be hung on the willows.<sup>13</sup>

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### Andrew Miller on the Distinction between Meetings of Believers

From their earliest history it is evident that reading meetings, so called, have been a mode of teaching which has been universally practised; and, beyond a question, they have been greatly used of the Lord for giving both an accurate and an extensive knowledge of the divine word. Many Christians both in the Establishment and among Dissenters, who would go to a friend's house, it might be in the forenoon or the afternoon, to read and study the word of God, would object to enter any place of public worship save what would be considered their own. In this way the word of God is closely read by small companies of twenty, thirty, or more; and, any one being free to ask a question, difficulties are removed and the true meaning of the scripture more clearly seen. Such being also considered instruction (not church) meetings, all are free to state what light the Lord may have given them on the portion under meditation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mackintosh, C. H., Stanley, Charles, eds., *Things New and Old, Vol. XXVI*, (G. Morrish, London, 1883) pg. 305-306

<sup>13</sup> Bennet, William Henry, Robert Cleaver Chapman of Barnstaple (Pickering & Inglis, Glasgow, 1902) pg. 92-93

<sup>14</sup> Miller, Andrew, *The Brethren: a sketch of their origin, progress and testimony* (G. Morrish, London 1879) pg. 26

# Meaning of ἡσυχία in I Tim. 2:11-12

1 Timothy 2:11 Let the woman learn in **silence** with all subjection. KJV

1 Timothy 2:12 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in **silence**. KJV

## W. E. Vine

Noun, 2271, ἡσυχία

akin to A, No. 2, and B. No. 1, denotes "quietness," 2 Thess. 3:12; it is so translated in the RV of 1 Tim. 2:11, 12 (AV, "silence"); in Acts 22:2, RV, "(they were the more) quiet," AV, "(they kept the more) silence," lit., "they kept quietness the more."

**A- No. 2** Adjective, ἡσύχιος has much the same meaning as No. 1, but indicates "tranquillity arising from within," causing no disturbance to others. It is translated "quiet" in 1 Tim. 2:2, RV (AV, "peaceable"); "quiet" in 1 Pet. 3:4, where it is associated with "meek," and is to characterize the spirit or disposition. See PEACEABLE.

## Verses

**1 Timothy 2:2** ὑπὲρ βασιλέων καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐν ὑπεροχῇ ὄντων, ἵνα ἡρεμον καὶ ἡσύχιον βίον διάγωμεν ἐν πάσῃ εὐσεβείᾳ καὶ σεμνότητι.

**1 Timothy 2:2** for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. **NASB**

**1 Timothy 2:11** Γυνὴ ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ μαθησθήτω ἐν πάσῃ ὑποταγῇ.

**1 Timothy 2:12** διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω οὐδὲ αὐθεντεῖν ἀνδρός, ἀλλ' εἶναι ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ.

**1 Timothy 2:11** Let a woman learn in **quietness** in all subjection; **Darby's translation**

**1 Timothy 2:12** but I do not suffer a woman to teach nor to exercise authority over man, but to be in **quietness**; ; **Darby's translation**

**2 Thessalonians 3:12** τοῖς δὲ τοιοῦτοις παραγγέλλομεν καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ, ἵνα μετὰ ἡσυχίας ἐργαζόμενοι τὸν ἑαυτῶν ἄρτον ἐσθίωσιν.

**2 Thessalonians 3:12** Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in **quiet** fashion and eat their own bread. **NASB**

**2 Thessalonians 3:12** Now such we enjoin and exhort in *the* Lord Jesus Christ, that working **quietly** they eat their own bread. **Darby's translation**

## Gingrich Lexicon

**5774** σιγάω

**σιγάω**—**1.** intrans. *be silent, keep still*—**a.** *say nothing, keep silent* Lk 20:26; Ac 15:12; 1 Cor 14:28, 30, 34.—**b.** *stop speaking, become silent* Lk 18:39; Ac 15:13; 1 Cor 14:30.—**c.** *hold one's tongue* Lk 9:36.—**2.** trans. *keep secret, conceal* pass. Ro 16:25.\* [pg 181]

**1 Corinthians 14:30** ἐὰν δὲ ἄλλω ἀποκαλυφθῇ καθημένῳ, ὁ πρῶτος **σιγάτω**.

**1 Corinthians 14:30** But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first **keep silent**.

**1 Corinthians 14:34** αἱ γυναῖκες ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις **σιγάτωσαν**. οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτρέπεται αὐταῖς λαλεῖν, ἀλλὰ ὑποτασθῆσθωσαν, καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει.

**1 Corinthians 14:34** Let the women **keep silent** in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

**Psalm 32:3** Because I **kept silence**, my bones waxed old, from my crying all the day. **Brentons's Translation of LXX**

**Psalm 32:3** When I **kept silence**, my bones waxed old, through my groaning all the day long. **Darby's translation**