

Women in the Assembly of Churches of Christ¹
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Southwest Church of Christ, Amarillo, Texas (January 29, 2023)

I. C. R. Nichol, *God's Woman* (1938).²

A. Advocacy for Women Under the Principle of Submission.

1. Women may pursue public careers, including placements in positions over men.
2. Women are not required to wear a veil or head-covering in the assembly.

B. Participation in the Church.

1. Women may pray/prophesy/edify in the assembly.

“Since the purpose of prophesying was to edify, and women in the church at Corinth did prophesy [in the same meeting where they ate the Lord’s Supper; cf. p. 124], it must follow that they not only spoke in words that could be heard, but words that were understood, else there would have been no edifying” (p. 121).

2. Women may teach groups of men in the church.

“If within the heart of any one there arises the question of Huldah in teaching a group of men, let it be remembered that she was inspired by Jehovah to do the teaching! God does not inspire people to do wrong . . . “If a woman teaches a Sunday school class, at the solicitation of the elders in the church of Christ, she does not usurp authority over man. She does teach, is commanded to teach, but not ‘over a man!’ In her teaching the Sunday School class in the church of Christ she does so under the oversight of the elders of the church and in subjection to the elders of the congregation” (pp. 28, 153).

C. Reception?

1. Foy E. Wallace, Jr. was disappointed and impugned the motives of Nichol.

The book gave “impetus to a dormant, pent-up ambition on the part of women in the church to overstep divine restrictions placed around their work.”³

2. John T. Lewis feared it encouraged women to teach and preach in the assembly.

Nichol conformed himself to “the whims and customs of some of our sisters.”⁴

D. A Limited Participation Tradition among Churches of Christ: “A Woman’s Privilege.”

1. Benjamin Franklin: Two Extreme Positions.

There were “two extremes—the one not permitting women to open their lips in any worshipping assembly, and the other making them public *preachers* and *teachers*.”⁵

2. Daniel Sommer: Women’s Privileges in the Church.⁶

- “publicly read in audible tones a portion of Scripture”
- “if a sister in good standing wishes to arise in a congregation and offer an exhortation, it is her privilege to do so.”
- “it is a woman’s privilege to teach a class in a meeting house.”

II. The Traditional Position

A. Church and Society.

¹ For more on this topic and more citations, see John Mark Hicks, *Women Serving God* (Amazon Kindle, 2020), 46-61, or this article: <https://johnmarkhicks.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2013/04/privilege-or-silence1.doc>

² C. R. Nichol, *God's Woman* (Clifton, TX: Nichol Publishing Company, 1938). Available here: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1369&context=crs_books

³ Foy E. Wallace, Jr., “God’s Women Gather,” *Bible Banner* 2 (November 1939): 15.

⁴ John T. Lewis, “There is Death in the Pot,” *Bible Banner* 1 (July 1939): 12-13.

⁵ Benjamin Franklin, “Women,” *American Christian Review* 10 (2 July 1867): 213.

⁶ Daniel Sommer, “Woman’s Religious Duties and Privileges in Public,” *Octographic Review* 34 (August 20, 1901): 1.

1. Women should not lead publicly in any setting or profession.
She is “not fitted for public life” since “she lacks, by nature, the will power to combat successfully against the cruel, relentless business world...woman is not permitted to exercise dominion over man in any calling of life...if it is a shame for a woman to be a public speaker, why is it not a shame for her to be a public writer?”⁷
 2. This tradition opposed suffrage for women.
This is “law of nature, and the law of God, that the influence of woman must be exercised through man.”⁸
- B. Public but not Private Application.
1. Women should not teach or lead publicly, anywhere.
“The same principles that prevent her from teaching in the church, prevail in the schoolroom or anywhere else; it is a question of women usurping authority over men and becoming leaders of them.”⁹
 2. Yet, women may teach privately, even groups of men at the church building.
“At the Sunday School the woman does not usurp the place of man in teaching all present. Only a few who wish to be taught” attend.¹⁰

III. Mid-to-Late 20th Century Practice.

- A. Applied to the Church but not to Society.
1. While women may pursue public careers without prejudice, they may not speak in the assembly of the people of God.
 2. All female speaking in the assembly became restricted.
- B. Both Public and Private Application.
1. In most places, what was restricted in the assembly was also restricted in private spaces (like Bible classes, small groups in homes, and one-on-one teaching).
 2. This was the consensus until the 1960s with the rise of chain prayers.

IV. Why the Shift and Complete Exclusion?

- A. Reaction to Three Social-Cultural Movements in Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries.
1. Temperance Movements: Women led the protest of legal recreational alcohol.
 2. Suffrage Movement: Women led the protest for the right to vote.
 3. “New Woman”: the movement of women into public spaces.
 - a. The contrasting movement was called, “True Woman.”
 - b. F. W. Smith summarized: women are the embodiment of “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”¹¹
- B. Safety and Loyalty.
Smith: “I conclude, therefore, not dogmatically, but to be on the safe side, that since the word of God does not *clearly* and *explicitly* inform us that it would be Scriptural for a woman to lead the prayer in the assembly of the saints, it would be best to conform to the custom in this respect of the ‘loyal’ churches.”¹²
- C. Question: *did we shift because of new insight into the teaching of the Bible, or was it a response to cultural movements, or both? How do we discern now what the Bible teaches?*

⁷ R. C. Bell, “Woman’s Work.” *The Way* 5 (August 6, 1903): 775-777.

⁸ James A. Allen, “The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.” *Gospel Advocate* 49 (December 19, 1907): 812.

⁹ James A. Harding, “Questions and Answers,” *The Way* 4.45 (5 March 1903): 417.

¹⁰ David Lipscomb, “Should Women Teach?” *Gospel Advocate* 52 (August 25, 1910): 968-9.

¹¹ F. W. Smith, “The Glory of True Womanhood: A Sermon Delivered by F. W. Smith to Graduates of the Horse Cave High School,” *Christian Leader & the Way* 20 (1 May 1906): 2-3.

¹² F. W. Smith, “About Christian Women,” *Gospel Advocate* 71 (August 15, 1929): 778-9