

1 Corinthians 14

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Examining a difficult or confusing passage of Scripture requires a great deal of prayer, thought, study, and humility. When examining 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 one must do so in light of its context, content, surrounding culture, and in full view of Paul's teaching on church structure and behavior as a whole. Sincere Christ followers on both sides of the issue of women in public ministry have a desire to be faithful to Scripture and to correctly interpret and apply it to today's culture. That being said, to one degree or another, we all pick and choose what we declare to be the unalterable truths found in Scripture. The huge number of denominations and ministries found in the world today attest to this fact. No matter the theological bent or motivation, even the most devoted Bible scholar interprets the Bible according to his or her own tradition and outlook. One must keep this in mind when examining 1 Corinthians 14:33-35.

The book of 1 Corinthians was written in response to reports of serious problems in the church. Paul knew the Corinthian church well; he spent eighteen months establishing it on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-18). The purpose of Paul's writing was to bring correction to problems related to conflict in the church, which had been

reported to him by a delegation from Corinth, and to answer specific questions church members had written in a previous letter relating to issues of morality and principles of order in the church. The book is broken into two sections. Chapters 1-6 deal with division, immorality, and disorder in the church; chapters 7-16 answer specific questions asked by church members regarding marriage, Christian freedom, public worship, and the resurrection.

Chapter 14 begins with a transition from the infamous "love" chapter. "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy" (1 Cor. 14:1).¹ Although often used appropriately at weddings, 1 Corinthians 13 does not deal with romantic love. It is a message for the body of Christ instructing them how to relate to one another. Love is the overarching, all-encompassing virtue for every believer. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul says it this way, "While knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church" (1 Cor. 8:1b, NLT).

Over half of chapter 14—twenty-five of its forty verses—is devoted to the misuse of the gift of tongues and prophetic gifts. These verses make no specific reference to gender, but words like "anyone" and "everyone" are

used repeatedly. The term “brothers” is also used, but not in the strict sense of a person of male gender; by definition, the Greek word *adelphos* “came to designate a community of love based on the commonality of believers due to Christ’s work.”²

According to the *Key Word Study Bible*, verse 33 indicates that the church was in a “state of affairs lacking control, order, or governance.”³ This is the context of 1 Corinthians 14.

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 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.” (1 Cor. 14:33-35)

At first glance these verses appear to mean exactly what they say—women must not be allowed to speak in the church. That would mean no praying, singing, or speaking whatsoever. No evangelical church today is this prohibitive toward women. Even churches and denominations who hold to the complementarian view of women in the church allow women to teach or to speak within the confines of children’s and women’s ministries.⁴

It is not logical, then, that Paul would give specific instructions to women regarding public prayer and the use of the gift of prophecy if they were not allowed to speak in the church meetings (1 Cor. 11:4-5). It may be helpful here to define prophecy. According to the *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible*, prophecy is defined: “To foretell the future; to declare religious truths,

utter forth words of spiritual exhortation, whether involving prediction or not.”⁵ Clearly, if women are to prophesy, they must speak, and speak under the inspiration and authority of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, 1 Corinthians 12 outlines the spiritual gifts that are to be used to benefit the body of Christ. The list of these gifts includes speaking gifts but makes no distinction between men and women.

The word “silence” (*sigao*) is used three times in 1 Corinthians 14. It is used to silence a person speaking in tongues with no interpretation (v. 28), to limit prophecy to one person at a time (v. 30), and to prohibit women from asking questions during the church meeting (vv. 34-35). In every case, “the way of love,” outlined in chapter 13 and orderly worship gatherings are the principles illustrated. Craig Keener states, “What is clear from the context is just that restricting one’s own speech is sometimes necessary to preserve congregational order.”⁶

1 Corinthians 14:34b says that women “must be in submission, as the Law says.” No specific law can be found which commands women to silence in public. However, Deuteronomy 27:9 states, “Be silent, O Israel, and listen!” Take on the position of a student. Listen, learn, and obey. 1 Timothy 2:11 states, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.” The emphasis is on learning, not on silence. Throughout the entire book of 1 Corinthians, it is evident that Paul’s motivation was for the body of Christ—not just the women—to grow up, to learn, and become a witness to the gospel in their culture.

The type of speaking specifically mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is in the form of asking questions. According to authors Deborah Gill and Barbara Cavaness, Paul

was not silencing speaking in general, but silencing continual speaking.

The tense of the verb *laleo* is not the most common tense (the aorist), but the less common Greek tense (the present) which emphasizes linear (on-going) action. Thus it is better translated “to keep talking.” Paul is saying in verse 34, “[Women] are not allowed to *keep on talking*,” and in verse 35, “It is disgraceful for a woman to *continually chatter* in church.” The kind of verbal action indicates that it is not women’s vocal participation but the perpetual disruptive rumble of noise that is disallowed.”⁷

Because the women were generally less educated than their husbands, they naturally had many questions. They were not being told not to ask questions. To the contrary, Paul encouraged them to ask questions, but to do it in a place (the home) where it did not constantly interrupt the meeting.

The tone of the instruction in 1 Corinthians 14 is similar to the instruction Paul gives in regard to observing the Lord’s Supper in chapter 11. The church at Corinth seemed

more concerned for their personal rights and expressing their personal freedom in Christ than for the good of the Church as a whole. Keener observes that it is not so much what is being done, but how it is being done.⁸ Paul encourages women to learn, but he wants them to learn in a way that shows honor and submission to the other members of the Church.

It is clear from reading the letters to the churches from Paul, Peter, and James that a lack of love and mutual submission caused many problems in the Early Church, just as they do today. Again and again, the Early Church was challenged to love and honor one another, be humble, forgiving, and not abuse their freedom.

1 Corinthians 14 invites a women to learn freely in humility and submission so she may, “Do [her] best to present [herself] to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

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¹All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

²Spiros Zodhiates, ed. *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, New International Version* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG International, 1984), 1575.

³Ibid.

⁴Complementarianism is the theological view that although men and women are created equal in their being and personhood, they are created to complement each other via different roles in life and in the church. This view is rooted in a literal interpretation of the creation account and the roles of men and women presented in Scripture. It is usually characterized by: (1) belief that God designed marriage to reflect the relationship of Jesus Christ and the Church; (2) belief that only men should be appointed into authoritative positions of leadership in the church; (3) belief that a Christian wife should submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ; (4) belief that a Christian husband should love his wife as Christ loved the church; (5) a generally patriarchal view of the family (the father is responsible to lead, provide for, teach his children to know and love God, as found in Scripture).

"Complementarianism," in *Theopedia: An Encyclopedia of Biblical Christianity*. <http://www.theopedia.com/Complementarianism> (accessed May 30, 2010).

⁵Zodhiates, 1669.

⁶Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives; Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 83.

⁷Deborah M. Gill and Barbara Cavaness, *God's Women Then and Now* (Springfield, MO: Grace & Truth, 2004), 135.

⁸Ibid., 72.