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Women in the New Testament's Church Ministry: The Problem of Remaining Silent

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Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 14:34, one finds Paul's command that women ought to keep silent in the church setting. Paul wrote, "The women should keep quiet in the meetings. They are not allowed to speak; as the Jewish Law says, they must not be in charge. If they want to find out about something, they should ask their husbands at home. It is a disgraceful thing for a woman to speak in a church meeting" (1 Cor 14:34, GNT). As a result, this command appears to be a subject of great debate for many since the text seems to contradict Scripture's view of women's involvement in ministry. In addition, it seems to contradict the fact that Paul has just previously mentioned women prophesying (1 Cor 11:5). Hence, it creates a problem designating this verse to be un-Pauline in nature, either by interpolation or allusive quotation. Subsequently, this begs for further investigation of Paul's prohibition of a woman's role in the church of Corinth, specifically, as it pertains to interpreting prophecy, praying, speaking in tongues, judging the prophets, and teaching.

Consequently, an examination of the text will be done to deduce what Paul originally intended to convey. The significance of this research is to provide clarity to the original writer's intention and expose falsehoods that have been created within denominational lines and congregational views concerning the ministry of women. An examination of the precontext and postcontext of the passage will be achieved to extract a proper contextual and exegetical analysis.

Further attention will be given to syntax and the original Greek language to determine if this passage speaks of an absolute, definite silence. Subsequently, consideration and research will be done on other texts within Scripture to see the extent of Paul's rhetoric in conjunction to women and ministry. Although difficulties may arise from translation and contextual factors relating to 1 Corinthians 14:34 and the role of women within the church, a close look at the literary and rhetorical context may provide a proper interpretation of Paul's original objective. The issue at hand is not one where Paul is against women having a role in ministry, per se, but it is a matter of women conducting themselves inappropriately, while failing to acknowledge the spiritual authorities before them.

The Text

Women Praying and Prophesying in Corinth

When approaching the biblical text, this blanket command that women are never allowed to speak within the assembly of the congregation most certainly raises brows. Consequently, there have been numerous interpretations of Paul's words. "Some believe that the passage is culturally conditioned. Others hold that what Paul prohibits in 1 Cor 14:34-35 is some kind of disruptive speech,"¹ and

¹ James Greenbury, "1 Corinthians 14:34-35: Evaluation of Prophecy Revisited," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55, no. 4 (December 2008): 721, accessed August 6, 2018, ProQuest Central.

there are those, like Harold L. Willmington, who take notice that, “Some scholars suggest that Paul limited the participation of women only in situations where church doctrine was being judged (14:29; see exposition on 1 Tim. 2:8–15).”² Willmington goes on to make note that, “Others explain the seeming contradiction between 11:5 and 14:34 in terms of Paul’s overriding concern for bringing order to a church in confusion (see 14:33).”³ Although these and many other interpretations exist, Paul’s prohibition seems to have a universal application. However, further inspection is needed to determine if this is indeed the case or not.

When dissecting the contextual background and looking to the historical and socio-economic factors of the church in Corinth, especially as it pertains to women, there are several things that need to be in view. Scholars like D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. Alec Motyer, and Gordon J. Wenham inform their readers, “Three points need to be noted in seeking to understand the passage.”⁴ The first point concerns the fact that, “(i) Wives prayed and prophesied in Christian gatherings (see 11:5).”⁵ Hence, one observes that Paul originally referenced the allowance of women, in this case wives, prophesying and praying

² Harold L. Willmington, *Willmington’s Bible Handbook* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997), 685.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ D.A. Carson et al., *The New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1182.

⁵ *Ibid.*

in the Christian assembly as it would have been meaningless for Paul to instruct on something that women would have been prohibited from doing. Paul avowed, “And any woman who prays or proclaims God's message in public worship with nothing on her head disgraces her husband; there is no difference between her and a woman whose head has been shaved” (1 Cor 11:5). Intriguingly, one is left to survey the background and circumstances of wives praying or prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11:5.

Upon further analysis, “The praying and prophesying here refers to that which was done in public [AB, Gdt, HNTC, Ho, ICC, Lns, NIC, NIC2, NTC, TNTC, Vn; TEV].”⁶ However, Ronald Trail provides further details to this matter of wives praying with their husband’s. Trail appends, “A meeting of the congregation or assembly of believers cannot be where this took place [Lns, NIC, Vn], because the teaching of this verse clashes with the command that they be silent in 14:34 [Vn].”⁷ Thus, one can delineate that the problem is not necessarily one of women participating in Christian worship at the church in Corinth, but how they participated. Carson, France, Motyer, Gordon, and Wenham further expound, “This was a common practice in all the apostolic churches (33b). The context is crucial *viz.* the evaluation of prophecy (v 35).”⁸ Along these lines, one is able to

⁶ Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Corinthians 10-16*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2008), 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Carson et al., *The New Bible Commentary*, 1182.

observe that what seems to be a major issue is the idea of “order.” Paul remarked, “God does not want us to be in disorder but in harmony and peace. As in all the churches of God's people” (1 Cor 14:33). The instruction Paul intended to give to the church in Corinth was one that shadowed, simulated, and replicated that of all the other churches in existence at that time. It seems that the believers in Corinth were doing things differently from what the other congregations were doing (1 Cor 14:36). Paul emphasizes that this directive was not merely a local matter, but that it was observed in a universal context—a directive given by the Lord (1 Cor 14:37).

Furthermore, “the phrase *tais ekklesias tōn hagiōn* (‘the congregations [or, the churches] of the saints’) is distinctive, occurring only here in the NT.”⁹ Frank E. Gaebelien avers, “The expression emphasizes the universality of the Christian community.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, this universality of Christian community is not to be mistaken as a universal, absolute, and definite silence for women (Acts 2:18 and 21:9). That would lead to a premature assumption as all of these churches were made up of God’s saints, and consequently must be governed in an orderly fashion. In this case, what Paul is indicating, as he did in v. 32, is that there needs to be a form of “submission” present when the saints are gathered in Christian worship. The apostle Paul maintained, “The gift of proclaiming God's message

⁹ Frank E. Gaebelien, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 276.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

should be under the speaker's control" (1 Cor 14:32). To add to what Paul has declared, Ben Witherington III suggests, "*Hypotassō* means "be subject to" or "be subordinate to."¹¹ When coupling Paul's rhetoric in both verses 32 and 33, one then observes that the restriction that Paul is applying here is not to be construed as a devaluing of a woman's role within the church, but rather to be "interpreted as simply consistent with God's order of administration (cf. 1 Cor 11:7, 8; Ephesians 5:21-33)."¹² God's appointed administrators are to be respected in public and the orderly conduct in Christian worship is to be maintained.

Furthermore, one detects that the indication of not being "allowed" is really a "passive voice [which] is also translated as a stative: 'to be proper' [NLT]." Trail informs that, "The complete clause is translated 'they may not speak' [NAB], 'the women should allow for silence' [NIGTC]."¹³ Thus, when understood from this angle, it does not seem to be an absolute silence, but a consideration of when to be silent.

Distinctive Roles of Men and Women in Corinth

The second point that should be observed, is the veracity that, "(ii) The *law* requires the acknowledgement of the distinctive roles of men and women, a reference to Gn. 2:20–24 or 3:16. Paul has already cited the former in 11:8–9."¹⁴

¹¹ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 287.

¹² Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 276.

¹³ Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Corinthians 10-16*, 248.

¹⁴ Carson et al., *The New Bible Commentary*, 1182.

While many scholars believe that this section of the text (1 Cor 14:34-36) was affixed at a later time,¹⁵ it becomes patent that Paul intended for these words to be in with the rest of his rhetoric. A number of esteemed scholars have determined,

That the verses are authentically Paul's and must be explained without recourse to interpolation theories (Dunn, Thiselton, Carson, Witherington, Martin, Mitchell, Wire, Keener) for the following reasons. There are a large number of contextual word links in verses 34–35: “speak” (*laleō*, vv. 27, 23, 28, 29), “silence” (*sigāō*, vv. 28, 30), “in church” (vv. 19, 29, 33), “subject” (*hypotassō*, v. 32), and more distant, but relevant, “shame” (honor; 11:4–6).¹⁶

However, the strongest evidence of Paul's authorship is authenticated within the pages of the original manuscript. Alan F. Johnson affirms, “No Greek text or version omits the verses altogether. The few Western texts that reposition the verses after verse 40 can be reduced to one major witness.”¹⁷ With this in mind, one then can attempt to address why Paul inserted this thought into his discourse.

There is no doubt that the apostle clearly has the Old Testament law in view: “They [women] are not allowed to speak; as the Jewish law says. . .” (1 Cor 14:34). However, one can establish that something new is happening in the text. Paul Ellingworth and Howard A. Hatton in their counterargument to the REB translation of women being “silent” in reference to Genesis 3:16, highlight that

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alan F. Johnson, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 271.

¹⁷ Ibid.

there is a problem with this understanding. Ellingworth and Hatton state, “This is less likely, first, because the probable Old Testament reference is to Gen 3:16, which speaks of Eve being subject to Adam, not of her being silent; and second, because the word translated *even* appears to make a new point (NRSV is better, with “also”).”¹⁸ This new concept seems to steer the reader in understanding Paul’s fervent desire to let those in the church of Corinth know that women “must not be in charge” (1 Cor 14:34). Indicative of a particular “order” that should be maintained.

Another scholar that seems to be in accord with Ellingworth and Hatton is F. F. Bruce. Anthony C. Thiselton observes, “F. F. Bruce, however, shows the difficulty of this view and offers a series of constructive comments. He agrees with most commentators that the law is likely to refer to the Pentateuch (cf. 9:8), but nevertheless rejects the widespread view that it refers specifically to Gen 3:16.”¹⁹ One is left to wonder if this is a result of over-postulating “the particular aspect of boundaries of ‘order’ which Paul has as his main concern: husbands versus wives; public space versus the home; speech versus silence; controlled speech versus uncontrolled ‘inspired’ or ‘ecstatic’ speech.”²⁰ This is definitely a

¹⁸ Paul Ellingworth and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 325.

¹⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *NIGTC: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1154.

marker of reading too deep into the text and deducing what the original writer, in this case Paul, intended to convey.

Other scholars that have also contributed to the distinct roles between men and women from the position of the Pentateuch, have been writers like Matthew Henry. Henry remarks,

We have here the reason of this injunction: It is God's law and commandment that they should be under obedience (v. 34); they are placed in subordination to the man, and it is a shame for them to do anything that looks like an affectation of changing ranks, which speaking in public seemed to imply, at least in that age, and among that people, as would public teaching much more: so that the apostle concludes it was a shame for women to speak in the church, in the assembly. Shame is the mind's uneasy reflection on having done an indecent thing.²¹

Henry seems to be making a valid point here. The issue at hand may not be one of absolute silence for the women in Corinth, rather, it may be a question of women violating the created order that God designed for human life. "The Pentateuch (ὁ νόμος) declares the *ordered character of creation and human life*," avers Thiselton, "and the regulative character (especially Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers) of *boundaries or differentiations*."²² Thus, it seems that "order" was a problematic issue and many in the church at Corinth were not adhering to this subject of Christian custom and godly instruction.

²¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2271.

²² Thiselton, NIGTC, 1153.

Women Instructed to Receive Education at Home

The third point in which one should pay close attention to, is the instruction that, “(iii) The wife is to seek the elucidation of points at home, which could well mean that it is her husband who has given the prophecy.”²³ While Paul has given the instruction that women may prophecy in public (11:5), it very well seems that what Paul is getting at, is that women should not prophecy in public when an evaluation is to be made of such prophecy. Witherington rightly denotes, “During the time of the weighing of the prophecies some women, probably married women, who themselves may have been prophetesses and thus entitled to weigh what was said, were asking questions, perhaps inappropriate questions, and the worship service was being disrupted.”²⁴ Consequently, this seems to prompt Paul in providing a solution to one of the many problems of disorder that is unfolding in the lives of the believers at Corinth. This in turn, contributes to the prohibition of the prophetic activity of women over men.

Adam D. Hansel implies this precisely as he asides, “Especially noteworthy in this regard is Paul’s qualification of “husbands/men” with *ιδίους*, since this adjective emphasizes the fact that the men they ought to address are

²³ Carson et al., *The New Bible Commentary*, 1182.

²⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 287.

their own husbands/men at home in contrast to other men in church.”²⁵ Hansel goes on to add, “This suggests that in the public sphere they were actually addressing—or cross-examining if ἐΠερωτάτωσαν assumes those connotations—men other than ‘their own.’”²⁶ This is suggestive that the women’s conduct was disruptive, forceful, and interrogative. Thus, Paul’s instruction on proper acknowledgement of authority is perceived since these women were speaking out in ways that usurped the present spiritual authority—that of their husbands or the church leaders within the Corinth assembly. Witherington informs the reader, “Paul affirms their right to learn, but suggests another context.”²⁷ Hence, Paul is steadfast in correcting this blatant abuse of privilege. Since evaluating and weighing in on matters of prophecy is an exercise exclusively appointed to the spiritual authority, women are to deliberately remain in silence during this process. Additionally, Paul seeks to resolve this issue to avoid further complications. Thus, he instructs women to reserve their comments until they are able to resolve them in the privacy of their own homes and not cause a public spectacle.

The Interpretation

²⁵ Adam D. Hensley, “1 Corinthians 14:34 in Their Literary and Rhetorical Context,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55, no. 2 (2012): 358, accessed July 23, 2018, ProQuest.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 287.

The Original Meaning for the People in Corinth

The church that Paul knew at Corinth was a seriously troubled church. Split by factions, crippled by abuse, and infected with an array of problems, the Apostle Paul writes to provide instructions and guidance. The believers in Corinth were gifted. However, in their pride and immaturity they abused many of the spirit gifts they possessed. Alongside their circumstances which were surrounded with all types of disarray, chaos, and confusion, Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 14 is that of orderly conduct in Christian worship. Consequently, Paul "insists that all parts of worship should be conducive to instruction and edification. Tongues, prophecy, and other gifts were to be practiced under strict regulation (26-33a)."²⁸ The church in Corinth was known for its unruliness and disorderly behavior. Paul continues his discussion of well-ordered and disciplined worship in light of God's character—a nature of peace and not disorder (v. 33).

In view of this reality, Paul commits himself to address appropriate order and the proper submission that is required as the saints gather to worship. Since the services at Corinth were typified by chaos (1 Cor 14:5, 12, 19), Paul commands a number of individuals to remain quiet (1 Cor 14:27-28; 14:29-31; 14:34-35). Within the persons or groups silenced were that of women who were serving as a distraction during public worship.

²⁸ Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 275.

While there are a plethora of interpretations provided by orthodox and contemporary scholars and writers, which are too numerous to recount here, one is left to question if Paul intended to stipulate that women are not allowed to participate in ministry or within a church service setting. However, the fairest explanation of this text takes into account the precontext and postcontext, while attempting to bring resolution to whatever conflict may seem to exist between 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Corinthians 14.

After investigating and examining the passage, it is observed that the issue at hand is not one where Paul is against women having a role in ministry, per se, but it is a matter of women conducting themselves inappropriately, while failing to acknowledge the spiritual authorities before them. “Whatever Paul’s view may have been toward the role of women in public church meetings,” affirms Willmington, “he clearly valued them as his equals in church ministry.”²⁹ This should serve as no surprise as many of Paul’s colaborers, and partners in ministry, were indeed women.

During his ministry, Paul affirmed the role and ministry of women. Willmington testifies, “As seen by his high regard for and dependence on both Priscilla and Aquila (see exposition on Acts 18:1–6); his association with the four daughters of Philip, all of whom prophesied (see Acts 21:8–10); [and] his

²⁹ Willmington, *Willmington’s Bible Handbook*, 685.

greetings to many women in Rome, suggesting their importance in the church (see Rom. 16:1–16).³⁰ Another example is that of Phoebe whom Paul recommends to the church in Rome and “who serves the church at Cenchreae” (Rom 16:1). Hence Phoebe is acknowledged by Paul to have an official position within the church.

As previously noted, women were allowed to pray and prophesy (1 Cor 11:5). Consequently, 1 Corinthians 14:34 cannot be deduced as to refer to an absolute, definite silence and employed as an indicator that women are to remain silent at all times and in all circumstances. In this singular case, Paul “teaches that both men and women, if acting out of place in the church, tear down the church instead of building it up.”³¹ Wiersbe goes on to assert that, “Paul also lays a responsibility upon the men; they were to teach their wives spiritual truths, but to do so at home.”³² Christian worship needed to reflect God’s order of creation. Andrew Knowles rightly points out, “In worship, men must honour Christ and offer him their glory. He is their ‘head’ or source of life. Women in turn must honour their husbands, because God has given men the responsibility of leadership.”³³ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck conclude,

Paul then wanted silence on the parts of married women whose husbands were present in the assembly, but he permitted the participation of other women when properly adorned (1 Cor. 11:2–16). Such silence would express their subordinate (but not inferior)

³⁰ Ibid., 685–686.

³¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the New Testament* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992), 462.

³² Ibid.

³³ Andrew Knowles, *The Bible Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001), 584.

relationship to their husbands. This contrasts with a disturbance caused by their talking to their husbands during the service.³⁴

It becomes evident that Paul comprehends that men and women need and rely upon each other. The creation narrative unfolded right before Paul's eyes. Women were to be subordinate to their husbands and their spiritual leaders as God had intended. They could participate in public ministry, but were prohibited to speak when it involved disruptions from their part.

The believers in Corinth were not to be deceived into thinking that they were the only ones which God had gifted with the ability to hear from Him or interpret His Word. These believers seemed to live according to their own standards. They acted independent of the other congregations in their day and had their own customs, as it pertains to the role of women in the public worship setting. "They were presuming to act as though they had originated the Word of God (i.e., the gospel)," maintains Gaebelein, "and as if they could depart from Paul's commands and do as they pleased in these matters of church order."³⁵ Gaebelein goes on to deduce that Paul closes this portion of his letter by encouraging "the Corinthian Christians to seek to prophesy and not to prohibit people from speaking in tongues, provided that the whole of the worship service

³⁴ John F. Walvoord and Roy. B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 541.

³⁵ Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 275.

is decorous and orderly (39, 40).”³⁶ Thus, the church at Corinth were to submit to God’s command by living out the standard of godly instruction and conduct.

A Practical Application

Paul writes to the church at Corinth, “Everything must be done in a proper and orderly way” (1 Cor 14:40). There is no doubt that through the course of history there have been irregularities in worship and a need to correct such wrongdoings. Just look at the church in Corinth. The fact is that, if every person uses their God-given gifts in a manner of edification, the entire church would profit in ways that would be beyond measure. And while, it is likely that trouble will present itself in any local church, Paul provides both for the believers in Corinth, and the believers of the twenty-first century, some guidance on how to handle disorder—including those that arise from prophecy, tongues, and distractive persons. The reality is that both men and women are accountable for their conduct within a public worship meeting. Women, just as men, are to be lifted up and encouraged to be full participants of ministry opportunities in the home and in Christ’s church. However, one must keep in mind that this must be done according to God’s command. A command carried out with order, beauty, and proper spiritual motivation.

³⁶ Ibid.

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