

Session 14 - Women and Silence during the Assembly. (Part 1)
(I Corinthians 14:34, 35)

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.” I Corinthians 14:34

- I. A question about the placement of I Corinthians 14:34, 35 in the text.
 - A. This passage has received much attention regarding its placement (for it seems out of place). For example, some scholars believe vs. 34, 35 actually belong after v. 40. Nevertheless, there is no compelling reason to believe that the verses are not in their proper place.
 - B. Others have interpreted that Paul is actually quoting, in vs. 34,35, men at Corinth who wish to gain control over the women in the congregation. They base this argument upon the wording of v. 36. Such an interpretation would proceed something like, “You [the men] say ‘women should remain silent in the churches’. What! Did the word of God originate with you?” Yet this is a stretch as an interpretation.
 - C. Still others have suggested that the text was added later and did not originate with Paul. These interpreters suggest that the flow of the passage is interrupted by vs. 34 and 35. In addition, some of the words are not typically “Pauline”. Yet this argument is difficult to support because the verses appear in virtually all early manuscripts of the New Testament.

- II. The context of I Corinthians 14:34, 35.
 - A. Chapters 11 – 14 of I Corinthians address matters related to the corporate meetings of the public assembly and in most instances surely refer to the worship services. Chapters 12 – 14 specifically address abuses of spiritual manifestations, that is, “tongues”, “prophecy” and the expression by “women” of their spiritual gifts in the congregation.
 - B. Paul argues that prophesy is more valuable than tongues (14:22 – 25). Paul appeals to the cognitive rather than the experiential.
 - 1. Tongues may have become a “sign” for unbelievers (14:22) but tongues are not the proper sign.
 - 2. Rather, if an unbeliever arrives and can understand (hears prophesy), then that unbeliever will testify that “God is really among you.” (14:25)
 - C. Paul then reviews the current status in the Corinthian church (vs. 14:26). We generally use this passage to consider how things should be in worship, but the passage actually is most literally translated, “How stands the case, brothers?” That is, Paul states the current status or case.
 - D. The “case” is that, when the church comes together, each has a tongue, a hymn, etc. but they are *not* being used for edification. Rather disorder prevails. (14:29 – 33)

- E. Paul appeals for order during the public assembly (for God is not a god of disorder but of peace [v. 33]). The phrase “As in all the congregations of the saints” probably best goes with v. 33 rather than v. 34. This is debated, however. Regardless, the intent of the phrase is that the Corinthians should adhere to common practices among Christians elsewhere.
- F. The activities of women during the public assembly, specifically “speaking”, are then addressed. (vs. 34, 35) Once again, the Greek words *aner* and *gyne* are used for men (husbands) and women (wives).

III. An analysis of I Corinthians 14:34, 35

- A. The concept of “remaining silent” is not initially introduced in relation to women. Paul has instructed those who wish to speak in a tongue without an interpreter should remain silent (14:28) and those prophets who wish to speak when another prophet is speaking should remain silent (14:30).
- B. In both gatherings in ancient synagogues and in the Greco-Roman world, women in practice were typically forbidden to speak in public (though women in synagogues were not forbidden from speaking in principle).
- C. Women in both the Jewish and Greco-Roman world were encouraged to speak through their husbands. “Not only the arm but the voice of a modest woman ought to be kept from the public...she should speak either to, or through, her husband” (Plutarch’s Conjugal Precepts)
- D. Yet women almost certainly prayed and prophesied in the Corinthian church (I Corinthians 11). Though some suggest that women actually prayed and prophesied in the home only or in small groups of females, this cannot easily be supported by a reading of chapter 11.
- E. The more conservative view of this passage suggests that the command to be silent is universal (that is, it is not limited to a specific situation in Corinth) but is not general (that is, women could open their mouths for some activities during the public assemblies). On this view:
 - 1. During the first century, God chose to speak through women as well as men and it was therefore appropriate for a woman to speak or bring forth a prophetic message in the public assembly (11:5). (Some, however, believe that the gift of prophecy, if received by a woman, should never be manifested in the public assembly.)
 - 2. On the other hand, it would not be appropriate for a woman to participate in a discussion among the men who were discerning the prophet’s message. (14:27 – 33, 35)
 - 3. Paul appeals to the “Law”, namely the law of Genesis 2 and/or 3:16 that asserts male spiritual leadership (woman is to be subject to man).
 - 4. This interpretation would favor the translation of *aner* and *gyne* as man and woman rather than husband and wife.
 - 5. The distinction between the “large assembly” and smaller assemblies of both male and female Christians is not critical to the understanding of this passage for most Christians worshiped in small groups.

6. Nothing prevented a woman from inquiring of any man outside the assembly, whether it was her husband or someone else (14:35).
 7. There was a difference between prophesying (passing on God's word) and preaching (an exposition of God's word). Open forum for discussion of God's word was for men only during the first century. Open discussion may have been very common during this period during the worship service.
 8. There are no modern day prophets (or prophetesses) so this spiritual gift is no longer relevant to the discussion (I Corinthians 13:9, 10). Prayer can always be in silence.
 9. There is no reason a woman cannot sing during the assembly, for by singing she is not interpreting nor engaging in exposition.
 10. The injunction must extend beyond exposition, for the principle of submission to male spiritual leadership is critical (I Timothy 2:11 – 15). Even if permitted by the men of the congregation, the appearance of a woman in a position of authority (such as leading the singing, making announcements or serving at the Lord's table) would violate the rule of male spiritual leadership.
 11. Wearing of a head covering is not binding (11:5, 6) but keeping silent in the assembly is binding. If a command is given in a cultural setting which ceases to exist, then the command ceases to exist. In contrast, the "Law" (14:34) does not cease to exist.
 12. The service of women is through good deeds (I Timothy 5:10).
- F. The more modern view suggests the command to be silent is local and relates to specific issues of concern to Paul in Corinth. The general principle of order can be generalized but not the command for women to remain silent.
1. There existed some form of serious disruptive speech among the women in Corinth.
 2. The Greek word *laleo* which we translate "speak" always takes its meaning from the context, e.g. silent meditation in v. 28 and speaking in tongues in vs. 23 and 27 of Chapter 11.
 3. There is no clear contextual indication of what *laleo* means in vs. 34, 35 but the construction suggests that the word means giving free reign to "irresistible impulses", to ask question after question, therefore creating chaos during the worship.
 4. The Greek words *aner* and *gyne* in 11:34, 35 refer to husbands and wives for the injunction to remain silent is tied directly to the injunction to ask their husbands at home (v. 35).
 5. The Greek word *sigao* which we translate "silence" in vs. 28 and 34 can mean "hold your peace" and is not universal but, for example in v. 28, applies to a specific situation. "If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet".
 6. Paul does not say "be in submission to your own husbands" but "be in submission, as the Law says". That Law is a law of submitting to one another. In other words, the Corinthians have no right to "do their own

thing” with regard to the verbal misconduct by tongue-speakers or prophets or by certain questioning wives (11:37 – 40). Let what happens everywhere else happen with you as well.

7. The “Law” cannot refer to the old law, for Paul says “Christ is the end of the law”. (Romans 10:4)
8. If we no longer insist that women wear head coverings (11:5, 6) during the assembly, then we should no longer insist that women remain silent during the assembly.

IV. What can we learn from I Corinthians 14: 34, 35?

- A. Paul was probably not addressing a specific heresy in this passage but rather disruptive behavior during the public assemblies.
- B. Paul addressed an issue that was inherent in early Christian churches and is probably inherent today. Namely, Paul focuses upon the freedom one experiences in Christ and the potential abuses of that freedom (10:23, 24).
- C. The boundary between a worship service and the public assembly of the church was not as clear during New Testament times and is not clear today. Paul is probably speaking of any formal assembly of the church (11:26).
- D. The major abuse of freedom during the assembly related to spontaneous outbursts during the assembly, including the misuse of tongues, prophecy and questions/interpretations.
- E. The injunction “to keep silent” directed to these wives (women) must be interpreted within the context of the general tenor of I Corinthians 11 – 14 (with the love of chapter 13 preeminent). Why does Paul place the great chapter on love in the Corinthian letter and why in this position?
- F. The injunction must be considered within the confines of the culture of the day. This does not mean that we have become a “cultural church”. Paul himself clearly speaks to how the Corinthian Christians should deal with cultural conflicts (10:31 – 33). During every age, Christians must express their freedom in Christ within the confines of the prevailing culture so that they do not provide a stumbling block to others. “Even as I try to please everybody in every way” (10:33a) is not weakness but rather a sign of love (10:33b, 13:4).
- G. The injunction must also be considered in the context of Paul’s reference to spiritual leadership in general and male spiritual leadership in particular. (11:7 – 12). Once again, we must ask ourselves how the Genesis narratives of creation shape the relationship between men and women in Christ.

References

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