

## I Corinthians 14:34-35: Are Women Allowed to Speak in Church?

---

*<sup>34</sup> Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. <sup>35</sup> And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.*

This text presents a confusing and sometimes troubling challenge for Christians who affirm the biblical principle of gender equality. As I note in a previous publication, this passage is “probably not intended as normative for every church in every age and culture. The challenge is to determine how such cultural admonitions should be applied to the church in other cultural contexts.”<sup>1</sup>

How should a Christian understand Paul’s prohibition on women speaking in public? This article will explore the text in its context in I Corinthians, provide some insight into the cultural situation in Corinth which might shed light on the passage, and interpret these verses in an attempt to determine their meaning for the church today.

### **I. Not a Universal Prohibition.**

Paul wrote thirteen epistles to numerous churches and individuals, over a span of many years. This prohibition is unique to this passage- nowhere else does he prohibit women from speaking in church.<sup>2</sup> Paul frequently repeats himself from one epistle to the next, but this idea did not seem to merit repetition. He says it only once, and only to the church at Corinth. It is noteworthy to observe that he says it in his first epistle the Corinthians, but does not address it in the second. It seems, therefore, that this should not be seen as a major doctrine, but rather as unique admonition to the church at Corinth. This article will argue, based on context and interpretation, that this passage relates to the first-century Corinthian church, not to the church universally.

Paul assumes in I Corinthians that women will speak in church. In 11:5 he assumes that women will publicly pray and prophesy, but he says that they should do so with their heads covered, out of a sense of propriety (which will be addressed below). He also affirms the equality of men and women in this epistle. In 7:10-16 he affirms that men and women are equal in making decisions related to their marriages, and in 11:11-12 he asserts that women and men are equal and interdependent. Thus, Paul’s prohibition on women speaking in church is not the logical,

---

<sup>1</sup> Mathews, S. H., Know the New Testament: A Concise Introduction to the New Testament (Rainer Publishing, 2016), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> He addresses “teaching” and “holding authority” in I Timothy 2:12, referring to the pastoral office, but this is not a blanket admonition to silence in the church. The injunction to “keep silent” is unique to this text.

theological outcome of a broader understanding of biblical manhood and womanhood which relegates women to a place of inferiority to men.

## II. Context of Sexual Immorality and Confusion in the Corinthian Church

First Corinthians is a specific document written to a specific church in a specific cultural, moral, and religious context. Most of its prescriptions are universal. For example, in 4:17 Paul says that he has sent Timothy to Corinth to remind them of what he teaches “everywhere in every church”<sup>3</sup>. Likewise, in 7:17 Paul writes: “this is the rule I lay down in all the churches.”

Some of the teaching of First Corinthians is unique to the Corinthian church, however. For example, in 11:18-21 Paul documents abuses of the Lord’s Supper that were unique to Corinth. Likewise, 1:10-18 outlines factions and divisions which were largely unknown outside of Corinth. New Testament scholar Gordon Fee writes: “the various sociological, economic, and religious factors that make up the environment of the city of Corinth have a profound influence on one’s understanding of Paul’s letters to the church there.”<sup>4</sup>

The city of Corinth was renowned for sexual immorality. The ancient writer Aristophanes coined the term “Corinthian girl” to refer to a prostitute. Much of the sexual immorality in Corinth was “of the same kind that one would expect in any seaport where money flowed freely and women and men were available... Paul’s Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.”<sup>5</sup>

Corinth was home to the temple of Aphrodite. The ancient Greek historian Strabo may have exaggerated when he said that there were 1,000 temple prostitutes in service to Aphrodite,<sup>6</sup> but his exaggeration is purely numerical. There is a long tradition of temple prostitution connected to the worship of Aphrodite at Corinth. Aphrodite was a Greek goddess associated with the sea, and also with sexuality.

The Corinthian church was not immune to the sexual sin of its surrounding culture. In 5:1-5, Paul addresses the church’s need to discipline a man who was openly committing fornication with his stepmother. First Corinthians 6:12-20 contains some of Paul’s most detailed teaching about sexual immorality. Perhaps due to the city’s connection with temple prostitution, Paul goes into great detail about the impropriety of sexual relations with prostitutes. It may seem obvious to the modern

---

<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy to mention that Paul wrote two letters to Timothy, and did not raise the issue of women speaking in church in the way he does here. In I Timothy 2:12 he does not allow women to “teach” or “exercise authority” over men, but this is a different issue than women speaking in the context of I Corinthians 14. This reinforces the idea that this is not something that Paul teaches “everywhere in every church.”

<sup>4</sup> Fee, Gordon, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Fee, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 8. 6. 20.

Christian that a Christian man should not visit a prostitute, but it appears that the Corinthian church needed such instruction due to their adoption of secular and pagan attitudes about sexuality.

I contend that this background is relevant for understanding Paul's admonition for women to "keep silent" in some contexts, as I explain below.

### III. What Does it Mean to "Keep Silent"?

What, exactly, does Paul ask of women in this passage? To "keep silent". He uses the word *sigao*, which literally means, to keep silent. This is the same word Luke uses to describe Peter, James, and John's abstention from telling the other disciples about Jesus' transfiguration (Luke 9:36). Paul uses this word three times in First Corinthians 14. In fact, he uses them in quick succession, so that the text we are considering is the third admonition to "keep silent" in the context of public worship. Let's examine these.

In verse 28, he admonishes those with the gift of tongues to keep silent if no interpreter is present. That is, if no one is able to explain the meaning of the message to the church as a whole, the tongue-speaker should keep silent.

In verse 30, those with older revelations from God are to keep silent so that those with more current revelations from God may speak.

In verse 34, women are admonished to keep silent, and to be submissive to their own husbands.

How should we interpret this? If the third "keep silent" is a continuation of the other two, then it is best read as an attempt to facilitate the clear communication of God's revelation to the church. The first two injunctions to silence are for the purpose of the church accurately hearing the Word of God. It makes sense that the third "keep silent" should be for the same reason.

Paul qualifies his "keep silent" injunctions. In 14:26 he writes: "Let all things be done for edification." In verse 31, the reason is "so that all may learn and all may be exhorted." In verse 33 he calls for clarity because "God is not a God of confusion", and states that God's desire for clarity in the proclamation of the word is universal "in all the churches". Verse 40 summarizes the entire passage: "But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner." The reason for each of the "keep silent" passages seems to be that one's speaking in that instance would create confusion or impede the clear communication of God's Word.

Taking all three "keep silent" injunctions together, we find that they do not call for absolute silence, but appropriate silence. Those with the gift of tongues may speak, but only if an interpreter is present. Prophets may prophesy, but must yield to recent revelation. Women are admonished to "keep silent", and to submit to their husbands. Further, they are to ask their husbands questions at home. The alternative is seen as "shameful".

Here we come to what is probably the heart of the matter. I'll argue below that there was something in the context of Corinth which would have led witnesses to draw negative assumptions about Christian women if they saw these women asking questions in church.

Below, we explore how and why this might be the case, and how best to interpret and apply the passage.

## V. Analysis

*<sup>34</sup> Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. <sup>35</sup> And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.*

In this section, we will examine key points of the passage and attempt to interpret Paul's meaning.

“Your women”- Most ancient manuscripts say “*gunaikas humor en tais ekklesias*”- literally “your women in the church”.<sup>7</sup> This passage follows directly after verse 33, in which Paul expresses that it is God's will that the Word of God be proclaimed clearly in every church. The contrast between “every church” (vs. 33) and “your women in the church” (vs. 34) brings the issue into clearer perspective. God desires that there be clarity in every church, but there is something unique to the context of Corinth which makes it difficult to obtain this clarity when women engage in certain types of speech.

This injunction does not apply to all women everywhere, but to the women of the church in Corinth. This is not a universal command for women to be silent in church. I assume this is due to the unique cultural situation, the city's widespread sexual immorality, and most importantly, the association of women with the worship of Aphrodite through temple prostitution.

“to speak”- In I Corinthians, this is almost always used to refer to some sort of authoritative public speaking- prophecy, words of knowledge, tongues, etc. However, it is assumed that women will speak in this sense (11:5).

“to be submissive”- The first two “keep silent” injunctions did not require absolute silence, but appropriate silence. We do not assume that Paul means that all tongue-speakers must be silent in church, or that all prophets should sit quietly. If so, what is the purpose of these gifts? Rather, he qualifies each injunction by explaining the reason keeping silent (no interpreter is present; a new prophecy has come). Likewise, I do not believe that intends for all women to keep silent in every church setting. I believe he gives a reason for his admonition to be silent in his mandate to “be

---

<sup>7</sup> The NIV renders this passage “women should remain silent in the churches.” This poor translation misses the significance of the possessive article translated “your”, which clearly links the passage to the Corinthian context.

submissive” and “ask her husband at home.” I contend that the prevailing attitudes in Corinth about women were such that a woman would be seen as unsubmitive, overbearing, or dominant if she challenged or questioned a teacher in public. The contrast he draws between “keeping silent” and asking questions at home give us a key to understanding the text. The reason is explained below, in Paul’s discussion of shame.

“it is shameful for women to speak in church”- In 11:5-10 Paul uses the same language of shamefulness to discuss women speaking in public with their heads uncovered. He states that a woman who has her head uncovered might as well shave her head. This seems strange to us, but Paul assumes that his first-century Corinthian audience will understand his meaning. Let’s explore this further.

The ancient historian Plutarch noted that it was the custom for married women to wear head coverings in ancient Greece, and for single women to go bare-headed.<sup>8</sup> Chrysostom noted that a shaven head was a common sign of an adulteress or a prostitute.<sup>9</sup> Euripides notes the common association of a shaven head with a “maidservant” or a “slave girl”.<sup>10</sup> These are the senses in which a shaven head was considered “shameful”, and the reasons Paul admonished women to wear a head covering when speaking. They were not to be seen as something shameful- a slave, a prostitute, or an adulteress.

Let’s apply the same logic to 14:35. In both texts Paul addresses two similar things: women speaking in public, and the concept of shame (or more properly, perhaps, the public perception of shame). If in chapter 11 he urges women not to speak publicly with their heads uncovered because they would be associated with something shameful, perhaps the same logic applies in chapter 14. Just as a woman in Corinth with an uncovered head may be associated with prostitution, so also a woman taking a leading or challenging role in service of the church may have been assumed to have a role similar to a temple prostitute.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This is not a universal prohibition against women speaking, but is applied locally to the church at Corinth, and to forms of speech that would reflect badly on the women due to prevailing, sinful sexual attitudes. The prohibition is against some forms of speech that may bring shame to the women by the audience’s association of these women with sexual immorality. This probably made much more sense to the original audience of this letter than it does to readers today, who are separated from the cultural context.

---

<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 232c.

<sup>9</sup> Chrysostom, *Discourse 64*, section 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Euripides, *Electra*, lines 109-110.

Why should Christian women in Corinth have submitted to this injunction to “keep silent”? Several reasons come to mind. First, a Christian should avoid the appearance of evil. Just as a Christian woman would not shave her head for fear of being associated with prostitution, so also she would refrain from specific behaviors to preserve her honor. It seems that, through no fault of these women, asking questions in church would have reflected badly on them in Corinth, while it may not have had a negative connotation elsewhere, so Paul admonishes them to “keep silent.” Second, a Christian should take care not to cause offense to another believer. In chapter eight of this same letter, Paul gives detailed instruction on not offending weaker Christians by eating meat offered to idols. In 8:9-13 he admonishes the church not to push for their rights at the expense of another’s conscience, and concludes that if another Christian is led into sin by his eating meat, then he should refrain from eating it, even though he has a right to eat it. The same logic can apply here: if a Christian woman’s speech will cause others to assume that she is sexually immoral (and thus give approval to sexual immorality), she should refrain from speaking in such a context.

The modern Christian might ask “is this fair?” Is it fair to the women of Corinth that they should be expected to make such an accommodation because of the sinful and perverse sexual attitudes of their culture? I would answer this question “no, it’s not fair.” Paul addresses this issue, however, when writing to the church about lawsuits. In chapter six he says that their lawsuits against each other are destroying their witness to the world. When faced with the possibility of a tarnished witness, he asks “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” (6:8). Just as Jesus Christ modeled for the church, it is better to suffer wrong from the world, than to fail in our witness to world.

Does this passage apply to women today? Yes and no. The injunction to “keep silent” in the church for fear of being shamed by association with slavery and prostitution was, in my view, unique to Corinth. As a pastor, I don’t prohibit women from speaking in church because I don’t believe Paul intended this text to apply to all women in all churches. It is not a universal theological principle, but a specific directive to a specific church. There is, however, a broader sense in which the passage applies to Christian women and men today: our greatest concern should be that the Word of God is proclaimed clearly. The litmus test for our behavior should not be our personal rights, but our witness to the world.

## Sources

Chrysostom, *Discourse 64*, section 2-3.

Euripides, *Electra*, lines 109-110.

Fee, Gordon, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

Mathews, S. H., *Know the New Testament: A Concise Introduction to the New Testament* (Rainer Publishing, 2016).

Plutarch, *Moralia*, 232c.

Strabo, *Geography*, 8. 6. 20.