

13. Women Silent in Church?

Introduction: One of the most controversial passages of the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 which seems to require women to be silence in church meetings (**read text**).

In this study we will explore what the original intent of this difficult passage!

Setting: 1 Corinthians 14 refers to activities that occurred during the coming together of the “whole” (14:23) church (see also 14:26, 28, 34, 35). It concerns how regular, weekly, plenary meetings are to be conducted. Thus, the regulations of 1 Corinthians 14 would not necessarily apply to informal gatherings or to any meeting that is not intended to be a Lord’s Day meeting of the “whole” (1:23) church.

Readers: Scan 1 Corinthians 14. What word is used repeatedly to describe those to whom it is written? See 14:6, 20, 26, 39. It is addressed to the “brothers.” This can be a generic term for all believers (both male and female) or it can refer literally to the men only.

******According to 1 Corinthians 14:26, what is the prime directive for any church meeting? See also 14:33, 40.** All things said in the meeting must be designed to edify (strengthen) the church.

Custom: Unlike the one man show of modern churches, New Testament church meetings were participatory, 14:26.

******Based on 1 Corinthians 14:27-28, how many tongue speakers should speak to the church at any given moment in time? They should speak one at a time.**

1. Under what conditions must any potential tongue speaker keep quiet in the church (14:27-28)? If he is the fourth speaker, or if there is no interpreter, he should remain silent.

Word Study: “silent” (14:28) is from *sigao* (4601), “be silent, keep still, say nothing” (BAGD, p. 749). The noun *sigé* (4602) means “silence” in the sense of the absence of all noise, whether made by speaking or by anything else (BAGD, p. 749). There is a less harsh word, *hesuchia*, that primarily means “quiet” in the sense of tranquil (used in 2Th 3:12) that Paul could have used, but significantly chose not to.

2. Is the intent of 1 Corinthians 14:28 to silence the tongue speaker simply with regard to tongues or with regard to everything else he might have to say (a teaching, a song, a testimony, etc.)? How so? The context clearly suggests that the silence is only with respect to speaking in tongues. He would still be free to verbally contribute to the meeting in other ways.

**** Based on 1 Corinthians 14:29-33a, how many prophets should speak to the church at any given moment in time? Each should prophesy in turn (14:31).

3. Under what conditions must prophets stop speaking (14:29-33a)? 14:30.

Fact: The Greek word behind “silent” (14:30 is from *sigao* (4601), which is the same Greek word that is translated as “quiet” in 14:28.

4. Is the intent of 1 Corinthians 14:30 to silence the prophet with regard to prophecy only, or also in regard to anything else he might have to say throughout the rest of that meeting? How so? It is obvious from the text that this silence is only in regard to prophecy. He would still be free to exercise other forms of speaking later on in the meeting (and for that matter, other prophecies as well).

****Based on a normal, natural reading of the text, what role should women play in church meetings (1Co 14:33b-35)? A surface reading would seem to signal that women are not to participate in the verbal aspect of the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting, i.e., they should not say anything! Paul stated that women are not to address the church four different ways:

1. “women should keep silent”, 14:34a
2. “they are not permitted to speak”, 14:34b
3. “let them ask their husbands at home”, 14:35a
4. “it is a shameful for a woman to speak in church”, 14:35b

Many have concluded it means exactly what it says:

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary states that “women were not to speak in public worship (33b-36) . . . The command seems absolute: Women are not to do any public speaking in the church” (Vol 10, pp. 275-276).

B.B. Warfield wrote that “precisely what the apostle is doing is forbidding women to speak at all in the church . . . It would be impossible for the apostle to speak more directly or more emphatically than he has done here. He requires women to be silent at the church meetings; for that is what ‘in the churches’ means, there were no church buildings then” (“Women Speaking in the Church,” *The Presbyterian*, Oct. 30, 1919, pp. 8-9).

Gordon Fee, in his commentary on this passage, opined that “despite protests to the contrary, the ‘rule’ itself is expressed absolutely. That is, it is given without any form of qualification. Given the unqualified nature of the further prohibition that ‘the women’ are not permitted to speak, it is very difficult to interpret this as meaning anything else than all forms of speaking out in public . . . the plain sense of the sentence is an absolute prohibition of all speaking in the assembly” (Commentary on 1 Corinthians, p. 706-707).

5. Why is it likely the Corinthians already know what Paul wanted regarding women's roles in church meetings (14:33b-35)? It is hard to imagine that Paul would start a church without giving them direction about church meetings! He spent two years with them before departing. Thus, whatever this means, this was not a new command. It was no surprise to them.

The Greek literally says, "let the women keep on remaining silent" (a present imperative) indicating an previously existing condition was to be continued. Had Paul wanted the women to begin to be silent he would have used an aorist imperative ("let the women begin be silent").

6. What evidence is there that 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 is applicable to all churches everywhere? It was for "all the congregations of the saints," not just Corinth. Notice also that the word "churches" (14:34) is plural. Since the New Testament writers generally spoke of one only one church per city, this flags churches in multiple cities. Further, the appeal to the "Law" indicates a universal application (whatever application the Law held for the Corinthian church would apply to every church everywhere).

Fact: The Greek behind "silent" in 14:34 is *sigao* (4601), the same word used in 14:28 and 14:30. As before, it means the absence of all noise, whether made by speaking or anything else. It truly does mean mute.

7. When silence was previously required in 1 Corinthians 14, it was qualified and limited in scope. The potential tongues speaker had to be silent only with respect to tongues and the prophet only with respect to prophecy. In 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 what qualifiers are given for silence of the women? The only qualifier is the phrase, "in the church." Below are the two most credible views of this prohibition:

Silent "in judgment" — This interpretation views 1 Corinthians 14 as primarily about the regulation of tongues and prophecy. Women are to be silent only with respect to speaking words "in judgment" of prophecy (which would be a non-submissive type of speech). The paragraph requiring the silence of women is seen as merely an extension of the paragraph on prophecy. To wit: In 14:29a, Paul commanded that two or three prophets be allowed to speak; he then regulated the giving of these prophecies in 14:30-33a. In 14:29b, Paul ordered that the prophecies be carefully judged. He then regulated this judgment in 14:30b-35. Thus, women are to be silent with regard to the public judgment of prophecy.

Silent "in church" — Women are to be silent with respect to speaking "in the church." Unlike the silence of those speaking in tongues or giving prophecy, women are not allowed to speak at all to the church. Their silence is not as qualified, not as limited in scope. It is absolute with regard to women addressing the whole assembly. "They are not permitted to speak" (to the gathered congregation). The text does not limit their silence to teaching or judging prophecy. What it simply says is that women are not allowed to "speak."

Important Balance: The context leading up to this paragraph concerns the guidelines for participatory church meetings. One of the main rules is that only one person at a time is to be allowed to speak to the church. Thus, the requirement that women should remain silent in church logically applies only to a woman being the only one up speaking to the whole church. It would not therefore apply to congregational singing, corporate responses, nor whispered comments not intended for the entire church.

8. Suppose that Paul’s intent was indeed to convey that women are not to speak at all in a church meeting. How would he have written it differently from what we have here?

9. Why would God gift some women with the ability to prophesy if He did not want them to use the gift in the 1 Corinthians 14 church meeting? To do this is not inconsistent with God’s economy. According to 1 Corinthians 14, God sometimes gave some prophets a prophecy that was not to be delivered at the time of revelation (“And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop”, 14:30). The same held true for tongues speakers: the fourth man with a tongue was not allowed to speak it (14:27), even though it was from God! (The same was true for even the first tongues-speaker if no interpreter was present). This principle of the holding back of divine gifts is also true for the women. Though capable of prophecy, there were to be silent in this particular setting. Further, there are many venues apart from the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting when a woman prophet could enjoy the free exercise of her gift (private gatherings, evangelism, etc.).

10. What of the statement in 1 Corinthians 14:26 that everyone can speak in the meeting or that all can prophesy? How can silence be required of women in light of the words all, any and each one in 14:23-24, 26, 27, 31? This entire chapter is addressed to the “brothers” of the church (14:6, 20, 26, 39). Thus, “all” of the *brothers*, “anyone” of the *brothers*, or “each one” of the *brothers* could participate verbally in the meeting, if “brothers” actually does refer here only to male believers. On the other hand, “brothers” can sometimes refer to all believers, both male and female. If that is the case here, then the situation becomes more problematic.

11. What is the significance of the use of the pronoun “they” (rather than “you”) in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35). Paul appeals directly to a group called the “brothers” in 14:6, 20, 26, & 39. Paul then used the 2nd person pronoun “you” in 14:5, 6, 12, 16, 26, 31, & 36. Significantly, in the paragraph about women, he used the 3rd person pronoun “they.” Rather than writing directly *to* the women, he wrote *about* the women. One has to consider the distinct possibility that the women were spoken of in the 3rd person (“they”) rather than in the 2nd person (“you”) because they were not included in the “brothers” nor the “you” who spoke in the meetings.

12. What did Paul mean by “speak” in 14:34 (also used in 14:27, 29)? “Speak” (14:27, 29, 34), is from *laleo*, and from the context clearly refers to speaking forth publicly (with a hymn, a teaching, a prophecy, a tongue, and interpretation). See BAGD, p. 463. Some have suggested that “speak” in 14:34 should carry the notion of “babble” and that what is being prohibited is the inconsiderate babbling of unruly women who were talking too loudly to each other during the meeting. However, a more suitable word to refer to babble would have been *lego*. As it is, *laleo* was used. From the nature of the word itself and from the immediate context, it clearly refers to speaking forth publicly.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34, with what position (or act) is silence associated? The silence is linked with “submission.” Whereas the woman’s head covering of 1 Corinthians 11 is a mere sign of submission to authority, this silence in the church is an actual act of submission.

To what might the word “Law” (14:34) refer? It can refer to the Old Testament or to a rule the apostles laid down regarding women’s roles in church meetings.

13. What does the Law of Moses say on this topic (14:34)? See *Genesis 2:20-24, 3:16*. The Law teaches the principle of submission; it does not mention silence (D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, p. 40). According to this passage, the women’s silence during the meeting is a form of submission. Silence in church is a New Testament application of the Old Testament Law’s requirement for submission.

Why did Paul mention the “Law” in 1 Corinthians 14:34? It was to show that this submission is a timeless truth, consistent with God’s principles revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is a God-ordained prohibition, not a Paul-ordained prohibition. It is divinely authoritative.

According to 1 Corinthians 14:35, what if a woman wants to ask about something?

Silent “in judgment” — This view applies the questioning ban to the critical, judgmental quizzing of prophets (no inquisition allowed!).

Silent “in church” — This view takes the ban on questions as further support for the position that the women were to be absolutely silent with respect to being heard by the whole church: they were not even to publicly ask questions of someone else who was speaking.

According to 1 Corinthians 14:35b, why should women ask their husbands at home rather than raising questions in the church meeting?

14. How would it be shameful for a woman to speak in church (14:35)? It would be a shame because she is breaking a prohibition that she not speak and shameful because she would be circumventing her husband’s spiritual leadership.

Word Study: “shameful” (14:35) is from *aischros* (150), “ugly, shameful, base”; also used in 11:6 (BAGD, p. 25).

15. Why might the apostles have not wanted women to speak in the church meeting?

Many men are quite content to be silent if his wife will do the talking. By refraining from speaking, the women create a dynamic silence that propels the men into leadership. Their silence is also a form of submission to their husbands, an example of the biblical truth that men are to be the leaders in the home and that wives are to be submissive to their husbands. That a woman is to ask theological questions of her husband at home motivates him to be the resident theologian and priest in his own home; it puts pressure on him to be the leader that God called him to be.

Who should she ask if she is not married or has an unbelieving husband? She could ask whatever man was in her life (brother, father, uncle, an elder, etc.).

Word Study: “Husband” (14:35), is from *andras*, and fundamentally simply means “man.”

There is no dedicated Greek word for either husband or wife. However, here it most probably does refer to a woman’s husband.

16. How can 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 be reconciled with 1 Corinthians 11:3-16? No conflict arises between 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Corinthians 14 if the silence is only with regard to the judging of prophecy.

Silent “in church” — 1 Corinthians 14 undoubtedly refers to a church meeting. However, it is not explicitly stated in 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 that a church meeting is in view. In fact, most of the prayer and prophecy a person would do occurs apart from a church meeting anyway. Certainly most New Testament historical examples of prophecy occur apart from a church meeting. A principle of interpretation is to start with that which is certain and proceed cautiously to the uncertain. 1 Corinthians 14 clearly concerns a church meeting and clearly instructs the women to be silent. 1 Corinthians 11a may or may not concern a church meeting. In fact, the portion of 1 Corinthians 11 that clearly does deal with a church meeting (11:17ff) indicates that the verses prior (11:1-16) were not describing a church meeting. To wit: “in the following directives” and “in the first place” (11:17-18) implies that the previous information (11:1-16) did not deal with “meetings” or coming together “as a church” (11:17-18).

Further, the word “churches” in 11:16 does not refer to church meetings per se, but rather to the totality of Christians living in various geographic locations. Just as none of the “churches” would have condoned adultery (an activity that obviously would not be occurring in the actual assembly), neither did the churches have a custom such as making women wear a garment on their heads when praying or prophesying (see the chapter about head coverings).

But What If . . .

Suppose a mother finds it necessary to call down her wayward child during a meeting; would this be a violation of the silent “in church” view? The point of the paragraph is that a woman should not address the whole assembly. The calling down of a wayward child may be overheard by the church, but since it was not intended for the church, it is not a violation of the passage.

Suppose someone requests a hymn be sung and two women rise simultaneously to play a piano accompaniment. Seeing each other, they briefly discuss which one will serve the church by playing. Would this be a violation of the silent “in church” view? Even though the church may overhear the exchange, the words were not intended for the whole church. It would be acceptable.

Misunderstanding: Some have suggested that it is inconsistent under the silent “in church” view to prohibit a woman from requesting a song in person and yet to allow her to request a song through her husband. The reason this is not inconsistent is due to the fact that the “silent in church” view does not mean women may not influence the course of the meeting. It only means that they must do so through their husbands. Upon hearing his wife whisper the song request to him, the husband may veto the request, thinking for instance that too many songs have already been sung, or that the theology of the song is bad, or that it is an inappropriate time to sing that particular song.

******17. What in 1 Corinthians 14:36-38 indicates Paul was anticipating opposition to his instructions?**

Just Paul’s Opinion? Some people claim that certain Biblical texts are not binding today because they were just the author’s personal opinion. That would not seem to be the case in with these instructions.

Application: 1 Corinthians 14:38 should motivate every church to take the time to honestly deal with 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35.

Some have suggested that the women sat on one side of the room during church and the men on the other. What Paul was really prohibiting, they say, is the disruption of the meeting when women would shout out questions to their husbands. How would you evaluate this suggestion? Absolutely nothing in the text of 1 Corinthians 14 suggests a physical separation between the men and the women. Further, there is no historical evidence that any early church ever followed such a separation custom. The notion that men and women were separated in church meetings was based on the floor of a first century synagogue found by archaeologists: there was a center isle. However, early church meetings were held in private homes, not special buildings. This small setting would make a separation of the sexes impractical. Finally, Paul instructs all women to be silent, not just some supposedly unruly ones.

18. How would 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 (women silent) apply to the Lord’s Supper portion of a church gathering (1Co 11:17ff)? There were two phases to every New Testament Lord’s Day church meeting: the Lord’s Supper phase and the Participatory Meeting phase. Both result in the edification of the church, but there are differing rules for each phase. Activities quite appropriate for one can be inappropriate for the other.

- 1) The purpose of the Lord's Supper is edification through fellowship. The Supper is like a beehive of buzzing and activity and interaction. During the Lord's Supper, no one person typically addresses the entire church. This is because the Supper is a full meal, a time of fellowship and informal one-on-one interaction. It is to have the atmosphere of a wedding banquet. No songs are typically sung (it is difficult to sing with a mouth full of food). As it is a fellowship meal, no one would teach during the Supper (listening to a message would necessarily squelch conversation). Though all partake of a common cup and loaf, church members may not even eat the meal in the same room (some may be in the dining room, some in the kitchen, some in the auditorium, and still others on outside).
- 2) The purpose of the 1 Corinthians 14 phase of the gathering is also edification, but through the exercise of the more public ministry gifts (like teaching and prophecy). 1 Corinthians 14 deals with rules regulating those times it is appropriate to address the entire church in plenary (full) session. Everyone is necessarily in the same room. Only one person at a time is to be allowed to speak. In the early church, the 1 Corinthians 14 phase followed the Lord's Supper phase (1 Corinthians 11b). Thus, the silence requirement of 1 Corinthians 14 would not apply at all to the Lord's Supper portion of a church meeting. During the Lord's Supper, no one person is seeking to address the entire church. The Supper is a full meal, a time of fellowship and one-on-one interaction. 1 Corinthians 14, on the other hand, deals with rules regulating those who would seek to address the entire church in plenary session. Thus, the silence requirement of 1 Corinthians 14 would not apply at all to the Lord's Supper portion of a church meeting.
- 19. During the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting of the whole church the women were not to speak. However, if people gathered one weekday evening for a prayer meeting or Bible study, could they speak? Why? See 1 Timothy 2:12.** 1 Corinthians 14 deals with a formal meeting of the entire church, when everyone is expected to be in attendance, gathered together on the Lord's Day, the purpose of which is the edification of the church and (if necessary) to make binding decisions regarding the correct application of Scripture (see the study on the meaning of *ekklesia*). In contrast, other types of gatherings typically do not occur on the Lord's Day (though they might), everyone in the church is not necessarily expected to attend, edification is not necessarily the goal of the gathering, the rules of 1 Corinthians 14 are not necessarily applicable, and no binding decisions as an *ekklesia* would typically be made. Thus, there is a difference in purpose and authority between a 1 Corinthians 14 meeting and any other type of gathering.
- 20. If the women are not permitted to speak at all during the 1 Corinthians 14 phase of the meeting, then when would they have the opportunity to express their praises, testimonies, prayers, prophecies, etc.?** One proper forum for the expression of all or any of these is during the fellowship of the Lord's Supper as a full meal (which is to occur weekly). Also, if a church has the type of community (body life) that it is supposed to have, the members will see each other regularly throughout the week and during these frequent contacts many outlets for communication will exist.

Historical Notes: The Greek biographer, Plutarch, wrote that the voice of modest women ought to be kept from the public, and that they should feel as much shame over being heard as over being stripped (Rienecker, p. 438). Also, it is a fact that women were not allowed to speak at all in the meeting of the secular Greek city *ekklesia* (Piper & Grudem, p. 153). According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica Micropaedia*, Volume III, “the ecclesia became coterminous with the body of male citizens 18 years of age or over . . .” (p. 771). If this reflects the attitude of the unbelieving Greek world, then Paul would have had to write extensively to convince his readers that in Christ women could now speak out in a group (contrary to their culture). However, no such words came from the apostle. Instead, he seems to agree with their culture! The verb tense of the Greek behind 1Co 14:33-35 indicated that the women were already being silent, “Keep on being silent . . .” (present tense, imperative).

Textual Criticism: Gordon Fee, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, suggests that Paul did not actually write 1 Corinthians 14:33-34. Instead, Fee believes it to be a scribal gloss, inserted by an overzealous copyist years after Paul penned 1 Corinthians 14! However, every known Greek MSS contains this paragraph, though in some it is moved to the end of the chapter. Also, it would not fit the pattern for glosses anyway, which are usually very short (this one is long) and which were generally added to clarify an obscure text (this paragraph does not clarify anything obscure).

Clever Escape: One way to avoid the offense of 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 is to make it merely something that really belongs in quotation marks! Under this scheme, the paragraph on women’s silence is taken to be a quotation from the letter the Corinthians had written to Paul (1Co 7:1), with 14:36-38 constituting Paul’s shocked response to their absurd idea. In other words, Paul disagreed with their gag rule. However, this is a mighty convenient way to dispose of an unpopular text (a little too convenient). The temptation would be great to dismiss anything one disagrees with in 1 Corinthians as merely a quotation! It is, to say the least, highly subjective. Also, this would be completely different from Paul’s other quotations in 1 Corinthians, which were very short (this one is long). In addition, Paul does not necessarily disagree with the other quotations he cites, but merely qualifies them. Here, he would supposedly be completely refuting it. Finally, a Greek particle at the beginning of 14:36 (*ayta*) is known as a “disjunctive particle.” This same construction is used throughout the New Testament. In short, this construction is a form of logical argument that is actually used to reinforce the preceding clause. The words that follow the disjunctive particle are used to enforce whatever statement precedes the disjunctive particle. It is used when the audience is tempted to deny or reject the first statement. Examples include Matthew 20:13-14, Romans 3:28-29, 1 Corinthians 9:5-6, and 1 Corinthians 10:21-22 (Piper & Grudem, p. 149-150).

Summary: Requiring the silence of women in church in 1 Corinthians 14 type of meetings has several advantages. **First**, silence in church is the most obvious application of the text. No convoluted explanations are necessary. Realistically, how much more clearly could Paul have written? **Second**, it encourages (and even forces) the men to verbally participate more and to take on the leadership roles in the church that God intended. **Third**, it is an object lesson signifying the role of submission that women are to play in both the church and the family. This object lesson would speak volumes to the disobedient, to the immature and to new converts.

An Observation: Most believers who disagree with the silent “in church” view will disagree agreeably. Occasionally, however, there will be disagreeable, emotional outbursts and distress. Not infrequently this will arise from those families wherein the husband is either **1)** Not the head of his household (i.e., the woman is the actual leader) or **2)** The husband not does love his wife as Christ loves the church (i.e., he is self-centered, dictatorial, inconsiderate, aloof, preoccupied with work, etc.), resulting in the wife feeling inferior, unloved, second class, insecure, or unimportant or **3)** The wife has a low self-esteem due to being brought up by a dysfunctional father.

A Matter of Perspective: Speaking publicly in 1 Corinthians 14 meetings is clearly to be the domain of men. Women and children are required by Scripture not to forsake the assembly, but the men are supposed to be the key players. The men alone are responsible for the proceedings of the meeting. They must rise to the divine challenge set before them. Men must learn to verbalize their thoughts, to reason clearly, to judge false teachings, to arrive at consensus in decision making.

Many will doubtless find this extremely offensive. “Woman may as well stay at home, barefoot and pregnant”, they will cry. Suppose a football game had no fans present to watch. Would the game be played any differently? You bet it would! Both men and women are of equal value to God. However, each gender has a clearly defined role to fulfill. Christian husbands are to love their brides as Christ loves the church. Men are to live with their wives in an understanding way, lest their prayers be hindered. A man’s primary sphere of ministry is through the church. A woman’s primary sphere of ministry is in the home. Men cannot bear children. Women are not permitted to speak in the assembly.

21. What do you judge to be the correct application of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35?

Presupposition, prejudice and emotion must be laid aside. The bottom line is what you honestly believe Scripture requires in 1 Corinthians 14:33-34 and whether or not you are willing to obey it.

**** = Ask this question before having someone read the text aloud.

Next Lesson: E-mail the next set of discussion questions out to the class (or print them up and hand them out at the end of this lesson). Ask everyone to consider the issues, answer the questions and be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting.

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