Women Keeping Silent In The Churches

1 Corinthians 14:33b-35

Intro: Almost all commentators agree that this text is extremely difficult to interpret. Thus, we should come to it with an attitude of humility, praying for light. Although most of the NT encourages full participation in ministry by both men and women, there are 2 passages which limit a woman’s role: our text this morning and 1Tim.2:11-15. The latter passage teaches a woman is not to teach or exercise authority over a man. Thus, a woman should not function as an Elder/Pastor/Preacher or authoritative teacher over men in the Church. Is this what Paul is writing about in 1Cor.14:33-35? Or is he saying a woman must be absolutely silent during a church gathering?

1. Total Silence View: In this view, a woman may not speak at all. She may not pray audibly, share her prayer requests, give a praise report, or quote a verse of Scripture. She *can* sing, because that is not speaking. At first glance, it appears that our text might support this view. However, just 3 chapters earlier, Paul said women may pray or prophesy as long as their heads were covered (1Cor.11:5). Those who embrace this view claim:

A. The Praying & Prophesying was Done in Informal Home or Small Group Gatherings – Not the Official Meetings of the Church:

- However, this is extremely unlikely, because the meetings of the 1st century churches were small, informal, and held in homes. These 1st century believers, would have had a very difficult time making a distinction between official and non-official meetings of the church.
- Also, Paul repeatedly speaks of prophecy as a gift that should take place in the regular meetings of the church (1Cor.14:23-29), *not* in informal, small groups.
- In 1Cor.11:16 the practice of women covering their heads when praying or prophesying seems to be a church practice, not simply a small group concern.

B. Another Argument is that These Meetings Were of Women Only: thus, these women were free to pray or prophesy with no men present. However, the admonition for women to
cover their heads as a sign of subjection to male headship makes no sense if there were no men present in the meetings!

2. **Disruptive Speaking View:**

Those that hold this view believe this was a local concern of the Corinthian church only. They say that the word for “speak” in Greek is *laleo*, which can mean “to babble, or prattle.” Thus, they conclude that certain women were disrupting the meeting by questioning their husbands during the teaching and chattering idly. They don’t believe that Paul was restricting women from *all* speaking – just disruptive speaking. **But,** why does Paul prohibit *all* women from speaking instead of just the disruptive women? Weren’t there any disruptive men? Why doesn’t he forbid disruptive speech instead of all speech? Also, this appears not to be an isolated concern of the Corinthians only, but of all the churches. Paul begins, “As in all the churches of the saints, the women are to keep silent in the churches.”

3. **Uneducated Women View:**

Those that hold to this view affirm that women were not permitted to speak because they were uneducated and would thus communicate many things that were false. However, wouldn’t Paul silence all uneducated *people?* Since Paul’s rule operates in all the churches, we would have to believe that all 1st century Christian women were uneducated. This is too much to ask! Further, we know that there were some uneducated *men.* Why didn’t Paul require them to be silent?

4. **Women Teaching View:**

Others believe that this passage is teaching exactly what 1Tim.2:9-15 is teaching: that women were not to be the authoritative teachers of doctrine in the congregation. However, the context of 1Cor.14 is not authoritative teaching, but prophecy and tongues.

5. **Judging Prophecies View:**
This is the view held by D.A. Carson and Wayne Grudem, and it is my preferred view as well. This view holds that Paul’s restriction on women speaking was in reference to the judging of prophecies in the assembly.

A. **The Context of 1Cor.14:** this entire chapter deals with tongues and prophecy. Paul is showing the superiority of prophecy over tongues when the church gathers. Prophecy is readily understood and results in edification, exhortation, and consolation. Tongues are not understood by anyone, and thus can only edify the speaker. Tongues results in driving away unbelievers because they think the church is full of crazies. Prophecies results in the conversion of unbelievers. Notice Paul’s concluding statement: 1Cor.14:39. We are not to throw out tongues, but we are to earnestly desire prophecy.

B. **The Immediate Context:** Starting in 1Cor.14:26 Paul gives regulations for tongues and prophecy in order to maintain order. He gives the regulations for tongues in 14:27-28. Then he gives regulations for prophecy in 14:29-35. 14:29 contains 2 parts: “Let 2 or 3 prophets speak” and “let the others pass judgment.” Paul amplifies 14:29a in 14:30-33a. Then he amplifies 14:29b in 14:33b-35. 14:30-33 refer to the “speaking” of prophecies. 14:34-35 refer to the “judging” of prophecies.

C. **The Law:** Whenever Paul mentions “The Law”, he is referring to OT Scripture (14:21; Is.28:11). However, there is no direct reference to women being silent in the OT. Notice, though, that the Law is not said to teach a woman must not speak in church, but that she should be in subjection. Elsewhere, Paul twice quotes the creation account in Genesis 2 to demonstrate that the woman is to submit to male headship (1Cor.11:8-9; 1Tim.2:11-14). Here man is created first, and then the woman is created for the man as his helper and under his headship. Thus, she is not to lead, but to be in subjection. Note: not being permitted to speak is in contrast to subjecting themselves. So, it is not all speaking Paul has in mind, but insubordinate speech. If a woman were to verbally judge prophecies in front of the congregation, this would put her in a position of being a superior authority in the matter of doctrinal or ethical instruction, especially when it comes to criticizing the content of a prophecy. Of course women were to silently evaluate prophecies in their own minds, but not to voice their criticisms verbally before the congregation.

D. **Asking Questions:** a woman who knew she was not to verbally criticize the prophecies might be tempted to “just ask some questions” of the prophets, but the result would be the same – the judgment of the prophecies. Thus, they were to be silent when it came to judging
prophecies or questioning prophets. They could ask their husbands later at home, but not bring up their questions in the church.

**Life Application:**

1. **We Affirm That God Desires Women to Actively Participate in the Ministry of the Church:**
   - They prophesied (Acts 2:16-17; Acts 21:9; 1Cor.11:5).
   - They prayed (Acts 1:14).
   - They spoke to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs giving thanks to God (Eph.5:19-20).
   - They stimulated one another to love and good deeds (Heb.10:24)
   - They encouraged one another (Heb.10:25)
   - They exhorted one another day after day (Heb.3:13)
   - They served the church (Rom.16:1,3)

2. **A Woman’s Restrictions in the Church has to do with Exercising Authority:**
   - 1Tim.2:11 – “entire submissiveness”.
   - 1Tim.2:12 – “do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man”.
   - 1Cor.14 – “they are to subject themselves”

3. **God Has Called Men to Lead and Exercise Authority:** this is true both in the home and the church. Therefore, women are to function, minister, use their spiritual gifts, serve, but not to lead or exercise authority. If that simple distinction is kept in mind, it will help a woman immensely in embracing her God-given roles.
4. **Here at Stone Bridge:** men will be held responsible to lead. They will be the Elders/Pastors/Overseers. They will authoritatively teach doctrine. They will be responsible to judge and evaluate prophecies. But God has called women to fully participate in the life of the church (serve, minister, function, exhort, encourage, prophesy, pray) etc. in non-authoritative ways.

5. **Why Is It Important For A Woman To Subject Herself in the Church?** Because by doing so, she is demonstrating the gospel! She is a picture of her Jesus in His relationship to the Father. Jesus did not lead; He followed. He did not strive with His Father to be the prominent one. He willingly submitted Himself to His Father's will, even unto death. Jn.5:30; 6:38; 12:49; Phil.2:8. As a godly woman submits herself to the male leaders of a church, she shows forth the beauty of Christ as He submitted to His Father for our redemption!