

13. Women: Silent in Church?

Introduction: One of the most controversial passages of the New Testament is **1 Corinthians 14:33b-35**, which requires women to be silence in church meetings. Since Paul is not here for us to ask him what he meant, we must deduce its meaning from the overall context and parallel passages.

Context: Worship in the early church was characterized by a principle of participation. The free use of spoken spiritual gifts was encouraged. 1 Corinthians 14 is about one topic, and one topic only: the proper use of tongues and prophecy in a church meeting. Paul's purpose in writing chapter 14 was not to convince the church to begin having participatory meetings; they were already practicing participation. Thus, Paul did not teach on the role of pastors in the meeting, nor of the importance of teaching in meetings. Paul's purpose in writing 1 Corinthians 14 was specifically to correct the misuse of tongues and prophecy in the meetings.

******1. Why did Paul prefer prophecy over tongues in a church meeting (14:1-5)?** It was because no one understood uninterpreted tongues (**14:2**), but prophecy resulted in up building, encouragement and consolation (**14:4**).

******2. Which manifestations of the Spirit should a church strive to have (14:6-12)?** He urged them to strive for those that build up the church, **4:12**.

What is the answer to the question in 14:6?

What is the answer to the question in 14:7 (musical instruments)?

What is the answer to the question in 14:8 (army bugle)?

What is the answer to the question in 14:9a (tongues)?

To what did Paul compare tongues in 14:10-11? He compared it to hearing someone in a foreign language that you did not understand.

******3. Why would Paul rather say five words in a church meeting with his mind than then thousand words in a tongue (14:13-19)?** It was because with tongues, **1)** no outside could say "Amen" when he does not know what was being said. Consequently **2)** the other person is not built up.

In 14:13, what prayer request should a tongue speaker have? The one who speaks in a tongue is to pray for the power to interpret.

4. Paul expressed a dilemma in 14:14 (read it). He then asked, “What am I to do?” (14:15a). What answer did he give to his own question (14:15b)? Paul said he would pray and sing with both his spirit and his mind.

What did Paul thank God for in 14:18? He thanked God that he spoke in tongues more than anyone else (he certainly was not against tongues).

In 4:19, we see the word “nevertheless”. What would a synonym be? Synonyms include however, but, yet, and after everything.

******What further reason did Paul offer for prophecy over uninterpreted tongues (14:20-25)?** If the whole church spoke in tongues, unbelievers would think them to be out of their minds. On the other hand, if all prophesy, the unbelievers’ sins would be revealed, and he will worship God.

5. Paul began by warning them not be children in their thinking (14:20). Based on what he wrote in the rest of the paragraph (14:20-25), how would speaking in tongues in church constitute immature thinking? See 1 Corinthians 3:1. They failed to understand that tongues were a sign of judgment against unbelievers, and would result in a rejection of the church and the gospel by unbelievers who heard it (14:21-23). To do that would be to act like children without care for the needs of others.¹

Note: The quote in 14:21 comes from **Isaiah 28:11-12 (Dt 28:49)**. The original context concerned God’s judgment against Israel as they heard the foreign language of an invading army.

Review: Church meetings are for believers, not unbelievers. According to 14:24-25, even though prophecy is for believers, what good impact can it have on unbelievers?

******What regulations did Paul establish for tongues and prophecy in a church meeting (14:26-33a)?** Two or at the most three could speak, one at a time. Tongues must be interpreted. Prophecies must be judged.

6. According to 1 Corinthians 14:26, what is the prime directive for anything said in a church meeting? All things said in the meeting must be designed to edify (strengthen, build up) the church. The New Testament never gives worship as purpose of a church meeting.

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

¹ Dennis, *ESV Study Bible*, 2212.

- “silent” (14:28): From *sigao* (4601), “be silent, keep still, say nothing.”² 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 absolute 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:

ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12 For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

8. 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 (teaching, song, testimony, etc.)? How so? The context clearly demands 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. *It is a silence limited to speaking in a tongue.*

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).

9. Under what conditions must prophets be silent (14:29-33a)? When a revelation comes to another person, the first is to stop.

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

10. 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 prophesies as well). *It is a silence limited to prophecy.*

****What role should women play in church meetings (1Co 14:33b-35)? A surface reading would seem to signal that women should not say anything at all in public. 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

Have a Care! Seemingly clear statements in Scripture can, if taken without consideration of the context, can lead to error. In this study we will explore the original intent of this difficult passage. Every text requires exegesis, even those we think we already understand.

² Bauer, *Lexicon*, 749.

- **“silent” (14:34):** 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, not necessarily with respect to all speaking, but with respect to the topic at hand. As with tongues and prophecy, the requirement for women to be silence is most certainly a limited silence. Paul had been focused on those times when only one person was up addressing the assembly. This silence requirement would therefore not apply to congregational singing, responsive readings, etc.

11. How does the context leading up to 14:33b-35 argue for a silence that is limited to some aspect of tongues and prophecy? The context leading up to this paragraph concerns the guidelines tongues and prophecy. Then, after the statement on women, Paul continued on with the topic of tongues and prophecy (**14:39-40**). It would be out of context for Paul to insert a sweeping prohibition of women speaking. Such a departure from his focus is theoretically possible, but is it *probable*?

That leaves three limited options:

- a) Silence limited to public speaking
- b) Silence limited to speaking tongues and prophecy
- c) Silence limited to judging prophecy.

12. When silence was previously required in 1 Corinthians 14, it was limited. The potential tongues speaker had only 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 context limits the silence to something related to tongues and prophecy.

Silence Limited to Public Speaking: The qualifier is that the women should be silent “in 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.”

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. When a woman asks theological questions of her husband at home it 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.

While it is possible Paul would place a blanket prohibition on women speaking publicly, how probable is it? To do so would have been totally out of context and much stricter than the requirement they be “quiet” found in **1 Timothy 2:11-12**. It is also necessary to prove the women prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11 were not doing so in a church meeting.

Silence Limited to Speaking Tongues and Prophecy: Some posit that women are not to speak in tongues or prophecy in a church meeting. This problem with this view is reconciling it with the activity of women prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11.

Silence Limited to Judging Prophecy: Regarding prophecy, 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 only with respect to speaking words of judgment against a prophecy. Judging a prophecy is prohibited because it would involve taking authority rather than submission (**14:33b**). Thus, the paragraph requiring the silence of women is seen as merely an extension of the paragraph on prophecy.

13. How is not judging prophecy consistent with 1 Timothy 2:11-12?

ESV **1 Timothy 2:11-12** Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.

14. How can the silence of women (14:33b-35) be reconciled with In 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul had already written of women prophesying? Some posit that the prophecy of 1 Corinthians 11 took place apart from a church meeting. However, the presence of a literary device called a chiasm mitigates against this position. Furthermore, Paul closed the section on women prophets by referring to “practice” of the “churches” (**11:16**) with regard to head coverings and prophecy. Thus, since women evidently did prophecy in the meetings, the silence commanded was likely with respect specifically to the judgment of prophecy.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34, with what attitude is silence associated? The silence is linked with “submission.” Whereas the woman’s head covering of 1 Corinthians 11 is a mere “symbol” of submission to authority (**11:10**), silence is an actual act of submission (**14:34**).

To what does “the Law” (14:34) refer? It can refer specifically to the Law of Moses, or more generally to the entire Old Testament or more specifically to the Law of Moses.

15. What does the Law of Moses say about women’s silence (14:34)? See *Genesis 2:20-24, 3:16*. The Law teaches the principle of submission; it does not mention silence.³ 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? Perhaps it was to show that the submission of the women 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.

³ D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 40.

According to 1 Corinthians 14:35b, why should women ask their husbands at home rather than in the meeting? The stated reason is that it would involve some type of disgrace. It is likely that this questioning ban applies to the critical, judgmental quizzing of prophets (no inquisition allowed!).

16. Why would it be shameful for a woman to speak in church (14:35)? It would be shameful because she would be circumventing her husband's spiritual leadership.

- “shameful” (14:35): From *aischros* (150), “ugly, shameful, base”;⁴ also used in 11:6.

******17. What in 1 Corinthians 14:36-38 indicates Paul was anticipating opposition to his instructions about tongues and prophecy?** He pointed out the fact what he was writing was the Lord's command.

Not 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 certainly not 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**.

So What?

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

NTRF's position is that women are to be silent with respect to judging prophecy. Factoring in other passages, women are to refrain from taking authority over men, thus ruling them out from being pastors and from teaching men. They are to lean in quietness, which does not require silence, but rather a gentile and quiet spirit that does not wrangle with the teacher (that is the men's job!).

Secondary Notes

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 aisle. However, early church meetings were held in private homes, not special buildings. This small setting would

⁴ Bauer, *Lexicon*

, 25.

make a separation of the sexes impractical. Finally, Paul instructs all women to be silent, not just some supposedly unruly ones.

It is not a quotation: 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 too convenient a way to dispose of an unpopular text. 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.**⁵

- **"Brothers" (14:6, 20, 26, 39):** This chapter 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.
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The Corinthians already knew 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 the women's role 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 the readers.

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

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

⁵ Piper & Grudem, *Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, 149-150.

short (this one is long) and which were generally added to clarify an obscure text (this paragraph does not clarify anything obscure).

It was true in all the churches: It was for “all the congregations of the saints,” not just Corinth. Notice also that the word “churches” (14:34) is plural. 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).

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. On the other hand, Paul referred to the tongues speakers as “them” in **14:28**.

What did Paul mean by “speak” in 14:34 (also used in 14:27, 29)? “Speak” (14:27, 29, 34), is from *laeo*, 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, *laeo* was used. From the nature of the word itself and from the immediate context, it clearly refers to speaking forth publicly.

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.

How can silence be required of women in light of the repeated use of the words “all, any, 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), a term often used to refer to all believers, both male and female.

**** = 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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