

Let Your Women KEEP SILENCE

***Long-Standing Tradition, in Churches of nearly Every Persuasion
Generally Excludes Women from serving in Pastoral Capacities.
What is the Source of Our ongoing Prohibition Against Women Speakers?***

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The Apostle Paul addressed a growing question that was beginning to raise concerns in the early New Testament Church. In synagogues of that generation the issue would not have come to the fore, as women were strictly prohibited from participating in any speaking capacity.

The focal scripture is the passage found in 1st Corinthians 14, verses 34 and 35, which reads: *“Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”*

Another pointed passage that factors into this issue is found in 1st Timothy, chapter 2, verses 11-12: *“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”* In any male dominated entity, this apparently clear prohibition settles the matter rather conclusively.

But that doesn't put the matter to rest fully with all people in our generation. There are a number of questions that this issue raises, and it can pose certain objections, in light of more modern considerations, not the least of which involves the elevation of the status of women in modern societies, as opposed to their status in antiquity.

How it Has Been Understood

Traditionally, over the centuries, Paul's admonition has been understood to be prohibiting any form of public speaking by women. But there are a number of interesting aspects to Paul's apparent prohibition that casual readers haven't taken under consideration. Granted, at face value, such conclusions, as have been drawn over the centuries,

are logical. But shouldn't we plumb the full scope of his instruction? There IS more to this matter than might meet the eye of the casual reader.

Was it Paul Alone?

First we should ask why it is that no other New Testament writer saw need to address this consideration. Paul was primarily the “apostle to the Gentiles”, and saw need to bring the matter to the fore in Corinth, and later with Timothy who was serving in eastern Anatolia (Turkey). Did the situation that was occurring in Corinth (Greece) differ from that in other congregations, say those with a more Jewish heritage?

Secondly, the instruction given to Corinth wasn't addressing exactly the same issue as Timothy was encountering in Ephesus. When we blend the two passages together we are prone to let one color the other, causing us to overlook essential aspects that Paul was addressing in the Corinthian situation.

What WAS Happening?

When we pull the verses in question out of their general context, we can lose some of the relevant considerations. The context of 1st Corinthians 14 deals basically with orderliness in Services. Paul encourages the expressions of the spiritual gift of prophecy, to the benefit of the congregation. (e.g. v. 12) As it might involve speaking in tongues, it must be with an interpreter, otherwise there is no edification. (vs. 17 & 27) Comprehension on the part of the hearer is the overriding consideration. (v. 24) Paul was concerned that Services not devolve into raucous confusion, rather that all things should be done in a decent and in an orderly manner. (v. 40, concluding the chapter). So we can see that his underlying concern was a proper and respectful decorum in the conduct of Services.

In the middle of this narrative, Paul addresses something else that was going on. It was how the women were conducting themselves. It is when he gets to the point of speaking of “confusion” (v. 33) that he addresses what certain women were doing. This is not a point made without direct relevance, it was in response to what was taking place. Paul makes reference to the heretofore prohibition of women speaking (the word is better translated “*speaking out*”) in a group setting such as during the Church Service.

Did this include tongues-speaking or prophesying as is the major subject of the chapter? Perhaps, but his wording suggests that it involved either questioning the speakers openly or attempting to prophesy on their own, and in doing so exposing their obvious ignorance in certain areas of understanding. Not so much a simple question that could be answered quickly and easily, but things that needed more involved instruction. It’s with that in mind that Paul admonishes them to discuss the matters in private, “at home” with their husbands. Women were apparently taking the liberty of interrupting the Service with “questions” or questionable assertions that were disrupting the “order” that Paul was attempting to interject into their formal gatherings.

Just as a consideration, would it be inappropriate for a woman to lean over and ask her husband a question during a Service, not in a voice that anyone else would hear? Taking Paul’s words very literally, some might say, yes, it would be!

Was It Just Married Women?

Some might note that Paul was referring primarily to married women, those who HAD husbands. What of younger unmarried women or widows? He doesn’t say. His admonition revolves around those with husbands who are themselves indirectly admonished to attend to their responsibilities “at home” in making sure their wives questions are answered. Paul draws-in the marital relationship as one reason for what he was saying. When a woman (a married woman) speaks out in Services, she reflects upon her husband, she reflects upon her married state and her being in subjection to him. That is the law that Paul made reference to.

Part of the “confusion” then would be her independent outspokenness. It would reflect upon him, and badly, if she spoke out with a matter that revealed her ignorance in any important doctrinal area. Not only the disruptive aspect of interrupt-

ing the speaker, but also exposing her disregard of her husband’s authority by publically challenging a man before the congregation. (Think what the situation would be if the speaker WAS her husband!) Thus the question: If she was in full agreement with the inspired speaker, why would she speak out? The reaction itself suggests what was really happening.

Let’s realize that the point of Paul’s statement in 1st Corinthians was not speaking in the sense of a woman prophesying or teaching. That is more the point of Paul’s later admonition to Timothy.

Conduct of Services

Most of us in this day and age are not familiar with how a Church Service was conducted in the first century. The format used in our present day was not how they did things. We see a glimpse of their order of Services (in the synagogue) that persons from the audience were called upon to come up and read a passage of Scripture and then expound upon its meaning. (Luke 4:16-21) The synagogue service was more “interactive” than we are accustomed to today. Even the opening verses of 1st Corinthians 14 reveal a less structured format. Various ones sought to spontaneously add what they were given by prophesying or speaking in tongues! That could cause confusion!

Another aspect of early day Services was its open interactivity: Likely much more than we would be comfortable with today. Men at times might interrupt a speaker with a point of doctrine or a question. That’s why Paul saw need to admonish caution against their gatherings becoming too disorderly. Add into that the factor of women doing the same, it injected another area of consideration: a non-submissive demeanor and the impropriety of publically challenging a man.

We should also realize that open interactivity created an argumentative atmosphere at times. When men argue publically, they take rebuke differently than would a more emotional person. If a woman was rebuked by another person, she would likely react to that differently than a man would. Men are known to insult the snot out of each other, and then end the day still as good friends. But a woman so rebuffed or rebuked, especially before the congregation would likely react differently. The risk of her being offended would be very high. Paul likely realized what could occur and for this reason also, recommended her silence, except perhaps speaking to or through her

husband.

Also, if a woman were insulted so publically, wouldn't the husband be obligated to come to her defense? His not doing so could be interpreted as reflecting obvious disrespect toward her. We can see in this the potential of the "discord and confusion" that Paul sought to avoid, both in the Service and in their marital situations.

But, before going further, let's realize that the prohibition against women speaking (better rendered: speaking out) was more in the context of being disruptive in a Service, not so much speaking in an official capacity.

Before continuing, we should consider this very revealing expose found in the Adam Clarke Commentary regarding 1st Corinthians 14:34:

"Let your women keep silence in the churches - This was a Jewish ordinance; women were not permitted to teach in the assemblies, or even to ask questions. The rabbins taught that "a woman should know nothing but the use of her distaff." And the sayings of Rabbi Eliezer, as delivered, Bammidbar Rabba, sec. 9, fol. 204, are both worthy of remark and of execration; they are these: **תורה דברי ישרפו ולנשים ימסרו ואל** (yisrephu dibrey torah veal yimsaru lenashim), "Let the words of the law be burned, rather than that they should be delivered to women."

Now, this is interesting in that it shows a general attitude toward women, where they regarded them as unworthy of being given the word of the law so that they might teach. Is this something else that Paul was suggesting they change by encouraging the husbands TO instruct them nevertheless?

"This was their condition till the time of the Gospel, when, according to the prediction of Joel, the Spirit of God was to be poured out on the women as well as the men, that they might prophesy, i.e. teach. And that they did prophesy or teach is evident from what the apostle says, 1 Corinthians 11:5, where he lays down rules to regulate this part of their conduct while ministering in the church.

"But does not what the apostle says here contradict that statement, and show that the words in chapter 11 should be understood in another sense? For, here it is expressly said that they should keep silence in the church; for it was not permitted to a woman to speak. Both places seem perfectly consistent. It is evident from the context that the apostle refers here to asking questions, and what we call dictating in the assemblies. It was permitted to any man to ask questions, to object, altercate,

attempt to refute, etc., in the synagogue; but this liberty was not allowed to any woman. St. Paul confirms this in reference also to the Christian Church; he orders them to keep silence; and, if they wished to learn any thing, let them inquire of their husbands at home; because it was perfectly indecorous for women to be contending with men in public assemblies, on points of doctrine, cases of conscience, etc. But this by no means intimated that when a woman received any particular influence from God to enable her to teach, that she was not to obey that influence; on the contrary, she was to obey it, and the apostle lays down directions in chapter 11 for regulating her personal appearance when thus employed. All that the apostle opposes here is their questioning, finding fault, disputing, etc., in the Christian Church, as the Jewish men were permitted to do in their synagogues; together with the attempts to usurp any authority over the man, by setting up their judgment in opposition to them; for the apostle has in view, especially, acts of disobedience, arrogance, etc., of which no woman would be guilty who was under the influence of the Spirit of God.

"But - to be under obedience, as also saith the law - This is a reference to Genesis 3:16: Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. From this it is evident that it was the disorderly and disobedient that the apostle had in view; and not any of those on whom God had poured out his Spirit."

This in mind, we can better understand Paul's background position on women speaking out in Church. But this commentary explains the REAL issue, being disruptive and contentious, not so much speaking, such as in praying or prophesying, as we read of in 1st Corinthians 11:5, which apparently was permitted. Paul himself lays down the guidelines for that in the same chapter.

In Authority Over a Man!

It is when we consider the instruction given to Timothy that Paul specifically brings out the second consideration. In 1st Timothy 2, the matter of a woman serving in a formal teaching capacity is addressed. There he makes the point that serving in an instructive capacity puts the speaker in effective "authority" over the men in attendance. Now we know that this prohibition would not include instructing other women or children. It involves those situations where a woman would be teaching in a congregational setting that included adult men. In other words, she herself being the primary speaker.

In our day and age, this is perhaps the major consideration. But in Paul's time, there was the

added consideration of the propriety within the husband / wife relationship. Paul makes frequent reference to it, bringing in the wife's submission to her husband, both in her praying and prophesying activities, but also in any verbal engagement with the speakers during a congregational Service. When praying or prophesying, she was to have her head covered in reflection of her marital status, but also was to refrain from open outspokenness when it came to challenging a point of doctrine.

What is Meant by SILENCE?

Today, we might interpret these admonitions by Paul with a different take than was originally intended. In fact, there can be significant differences as to the full meaning of what Paul said, depending on where a reader chooses to draw the line.

Does "not speaking" apply to just during a formal Service or does it involve the time when she is on the premises? May the wife sing, as that would involve her voice being heard? Is she permitted to give a prayer request? Would it be inappropriate for her to update others in audience as to the status of someone who is experiencing health issues? To what degree must she remain silent? Then again. Paul lays down proper decorum for when a wife might pray or prophesy (with her head covered) in public. Would sign language be the preferable method of communication? Different interpreters might give differing answers to each question.

Often there are inadequacies when translating from one language into another or in transposing one cultural norm into another. The word Paul uses for "speak" is not a simple uttering of one's voice. The English word choice might suggest that. The original Greek is "*laleo*", which might be better translated "be outspoken". The Adam Clark Commentary given above would support that meaning, where it says: "It was permitted to any man to **ask questions**, to **object**, **altercate**, attempt to **refute**, etc., in the synagogue; but this liberty was not allowed to any woman. St. Paul confirms this in reference also to the Christian Church; he orders them to keep silence; and, if they wished to learn any thing, let them inquire of their husbands at home; because **it was perfectly indecorous for women to be contending with men in public assemblies, on points of doctrine, cases of conscience, etc.**"

Here we can see that this commentator realized the more comprehensive meaning of the term Paul

chose to use. Not all religious persuasions are found to be that astute.

Two Different Considerations

So, while Paul in 1st Corinthians 14 addressed the propriety of a woman being outspoken in a congregational setting, interrupting and / or publically disputing a matter, he did so under a secondary consideration of the marital relationship and a woman's need to remain submissive to her husband's authority in their relationship. Paul does not state the same thing as it might involve a widow or spinster, though it could be said the same carries over by implication.

Also, let's not forget the underlying context of Paul's admonition in 1st Corinthians 14, that of not creating "discord or confusion". That would involve not only disruptions in a Service, but could also create stresses within a marital relationship.

But in 1st Timothy 2, a different consideration is brought into the picture. Under that consideration he addresses the matter of a woman being in a teaching position, those which would effectively place her in authority over men. To some degree that could be deduced from the 1st Corinthians passage, but not so obviously. 1st Timothy 2 relates more to a woman assuming the role of teacher over an assembly, not so much her indecorous interruption of Services or apparent impropriety with her marital relationship. Now such a thing as a woman speaker, though perhaps not common, was known, as can be seen in places such as Revelation 2:20. The problem there wasn't so much Jezebel's gender (and must we presume she was married?) it was her corrupted teachings. Again, would Paul have addressed the matter to the Ephesian congregation where Timothy was serving, as he did, if such things weren't even happening?

That situation where a woman was teaching was perhaps just one generation later than when Timothy was in Ephesus. Thyatira was literally just down the road!

Now, this second consideration expands on the questions that might be asked. Would it be inappropriate for a woman to be a choir director? May she lead congregational singing? May she serve as an usher? What about special music or playing the piano? Would just reading a scripture to the congregation be pushing the envelope?

May she perform clerical duties? These would reflect more on the “being in authority” matter.

Ask at Her Husband Home

Why does Paul advocate a wife refrain from questioning and instead ask her husband at home? Would it be inappropriate to ever ask a question in a congregational setting? Would it be indecorous to lean over and quietly ask something of her husband there in Services?

The preferability of asking at home reflects the responsibility of the husband to be the spiritual leader in the home. Asking a question, of and by itself, was not the entire issue. A widow or young person might ask a question in an informal gathering, such as at a Bible Study or Fellowship Gathering. But Paul, in stating what he did, puts more of the responsibility for the husband to become better informed and to be able to reflect the spiritual leadership appropriate to his role in his family. In this too, Paul is showing the same consideration to the husband’s role that he is expecting their wives to show.

How Commentaries Weigh-In

Expositors Bible Commentary: Has this to say regarding 1st Timothy 2:11-12: “The teaching of these two verses is similar to that found in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35. There Paul tells the women that they are not allowed to talk out loud in the public services; here he says that they are to “learn in quietness and full submission.” Titus 2:5 suggests that he means a wife is to be submissive to her husband. But it may well have the wider application of “submission to constituted authority, i.e., the officials and regulations of the Church” (*Ramsay*, quoted in *Lock*, p. 32).

The attitude of the Greeks toward women's place in society was not altogether uniform. Plato gave them practical equality with men. But Aristotle thought their activities should be severely limited, and his views generally prevailed. Plutarch (*Moral Essays*, p. 785) sounds much the same note as Paul does here. (It may be some of this independent attitude, common in their Hellenistic culture, that saw need for Paul to dampen with clearest admonition.)

The expression “full submission” needs to be treated intelligently. Vine offers this helpful comment: “The injunction is not directed towards a surrender of mind and conscience, or the abandonment of the duty of private judgment; the phrase “with all subjection” is a warning against the usurpation of authority, as, e.g., in the next verse” (p. 45).

Specifically Paul says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man.” Some have even said that the apostle's prohibition excludes women from teaching Sunday school classes. But he is talking about the public assemblies of the church. Paul speaks appreciatively of the fact that Timothy himself had been taught the right way by his godly mother and grandmother (2Tim 1:5; 3:15). The apostle also writes to Titus that the older women are to train the younger (Titus 2:3-4). Women have always carried the major responsibility for teaching small children, in both home and church school. And what could we have done without them!

The word *silent* translates *en hesychia*, exactly the same phrase that is rendered “in quietness” in v. 11. Quietness is an important Christian virtue. Paul was especially opposed to confusion in the public services of the church (1Cor 14:33).¹ And in 1st Corinthians 14, that was his major point.

JF&B Commentary² says: “... for a woman to speak in public would be an act of independence, as if they were not subject to their husbands...” They also suggest: “... shame would be better translated: indecorous”

A.T. Robertson Commentary: “silence” comparable to disorders caused by speaking in tongues. ... women were creating disturbances by their dress (v.28) and now by their speech. ... (i.e. outspokenness) Daughters of Philip were prophetesses.” (Acts 21:8-9)

Matthew Henry: “women did pray and prophesy in assemblies... (1Cor. 11:5) ...learning at home puts the onus on the man to remain superior to his wife in spiritual understanding... (it shames the man if she appears superior to him in this area...)”

So In Summary

¹ *Expositor's Bible Commentary, The*, Pradis CD-ROM:1 Timothy/Exposition of 1 Timothy/V. Worship and Conduct (2:1-3:16)/C. Women (2:9-15), Book Version: 4.0.2

² *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Bible Commentary*

When we examine Paul's overall narrative as it regards the role of women in the Church, we are acquainted with three primary considerations: 1) The disruptiveness of a woman being outspoken, interrupting or taking exception to what a speaker was presenting, 2) the impropriety of a woman in a way discrediting her marital relationship and the obligations to reflect an appropriate submissiveness, and perhaps most importantly, 3) the impropriety of taking a leadership role over men. When these three considerations have been appropriately factored-in, can we say we have complied with the criteria Paul laid down?

The problem is, when religious institutions develop a culture where women are basically allowed no role at all in the congregation. (For that matter, in the WCG culture, and many of the groups developed from that heritage, even the men are compelled into a silence, being allowed no say or service function. It's all limited to a selected few whose choice for service, typically, will enhance the prestige of the resident overlord.)

Now, Paul's position doesn't exclude women from any and all important roles within the Church. What those permissible roles might be are subject to varying opinions, which can prove divisive. Not all agree on what roles are appropriate. But Paul laid a foundation. Taking into account his above three prime considerations, we should be provided with sufficient underlying basis upon which determinations are made as to what service roles are proper.

A Contempt for Women?

Paul has been labelled as a 'woman hater' by some who chafe at such restrictions. It can be taken either of two ways from there. Some can take the position that women ought to be allowed more latitude in serving the congregation while others may use Paul's admonitions as justification for suppressing women to an even greater degree than was ever intended.

It is clear that Paul worked with and appreciated the services of many women in the Church. Consider these passages from Romans chapter 16:

"I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also. Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: Who have for my life laid

down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my wellbeloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ. Greet Mary, who bestowed much labour on us. Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellowprisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me..."

Obviously, there were noteworthy individuals, women, who were of great value in the Church. Regarding Phebe, for her to be attending to Church business, and for Paul to instruct those in Rome to assist her, suggests she was in charge of some activity essential to the Church there. She was obviously very involved also in the personal lives of many, succoring them in some manner. How many like that do we see today? Mary also is commended as a fellow laborer.

Then there were husband / wife teams who at times carried congregations and educated even the ministry.³ Paul gives special mention to Priscilla (mentioning her first here and in later references) with Aquila her husband.

Orderliness: Next to Godliness!

What Paul has to say regarding the role of women is not to put down women nor to discredit them or exclude them from any service. His admonitions were intended to create an **order** in the Church, which is consistent with the context in 1st Corinthians 14: *All things being done decently and in order!* (v. 40) He advocates a consistent decorum that promotes order in a Services format. He advocates a woman's deference toward her husband that promotes order in the marital relationship, (which incidentally illustrates the Church's relationship with Christ).⁴ Thirdly, he advocates a proper role within the congregations' political structure that promotes order within its educational services. None of this should be regarded as intending to degrade anyone, nor should any man use it as justification for a contemptuous attitude.

May the Spirit of God guide us all in our acceptance of the assignments of women to various appropriate service functions in the Church, recognizing that not all see things identically. We

³ 1st Cor. 4:6-9 Apollos, an eloquent speaker, later alluded to as an apostle, was instructed more adequately in the Faith by this couple. Acts 18:24-26.

⁴ Ephesians 5:22-33.

all can carry ‘baggage’ as did the first century Jewish contingent. As we seek to comply with Paul’s admonitions, we should do so without creating confusion or discord of a different sort, nor create any divisive spirit within the congregations. When the Spirit of God inspires genuine enthusiasm in anyone, man, woman or youth, ⁵ woe be to that individual who would in any way suppress that enthusiasm! 

⁵ Acts 2:17