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## Women In Silence: Paul's Words about Disruptive Women in Church Gatherings

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## INTRODUCTION

A central point of contention amongst contemporary churches is the ordination of women, or more simply, the actions of women during church gatherings. The apostle Paul appears to state his views quite clearly, notably in the first epistle to the Corinthians: “women should be silent in the churches” (1 Corinthians 14:34, NRSV).<sup>1</sup> While this passage appears to take a direct opposition to women speaking in the church, there is an underlying context that is often neglected and ought to be taken into consideration. Thus, the goal of this paper is to provide that historical context and propose that Paul allowed women to speak. After careful examination, it seems more probable that Paul does not write this as a directive to silence women in all churches. Instead, he distinctly instructs Corinthian women to remain silent in 1 Corinthians 14:31-35, signifying the importance of keeping churches free from disruption, both male and female, rather than preventing women from praying, prophesying, or speaking during a gathering.

## CONTEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 14:31-35

The letter to the Corinthians is a typical Pauline epistle. It contained a greeting, discourse of encouragement, instructions, and a benediction. During the body of the letter, Paul identifies faults within the Corinthian church and gives guidance in addressing the changes that need to be made. In v. 26 of chapter 14, Paul speaks of orderly worship within the church and mentions the spiritual gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues as critical tools in strengthening the church. Following this, he provides an explanation of how these two gifts should naturally occur, and what qualities should follow them. As explained by Andrew Spurgeon, each of these gifts must meet three criteria in order to be effective. The criteria are as follows: “First, there should be only two or three speakers of foreign languages in a church gathering (v. 27b). Second, language speakers must take turns so that their words do not overlap and become meaningless (v. 27c). Third, someone needs to interpret what is said (v. 27; cf. vv. 6, 13).” Following this, Spurgeon provides the three criteria for prophesying: “First, only two or three prophets should speak in a church gathering (v. 29a). Second, other prophets must examine the prophecy to determine its authenticity and orthodoxy (w. 29b, 32). Third, while a prophet is speaking, if someone sitting in the congregation receives a revelation (from God), the former prophet must remain silent (συνάω, v. 30).”<sup>2</sup> The following verses make up the passage:

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew B. Spurgeon, “Pauline Commands and Women in 1 Corinthians 14.” *BSAC* 168 (2011): 318.

**31** For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. **32** And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, **33** for God is a God not of disorder but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, **34** women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. **35** If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:31-35).

The passage shown here directly follows Paul's mention of speaking in tongues, prophesying, and their criteria. Thus, the passage that is under examination here is given in the context of the same goal: strengthening the church.

Craig Keener contends that Paul is speaking to women's desire for knowledge and that their speaking during church gatherings amounts simply to ask questions. Keener says,

[...] the only kind of speaking *specifically* addressed in 14:34–35 is that the wife should ask her husband questions at home, rather than continuing what she is doing. Unless Paul changes the subject from women's silent submission (v. 34) to their asking questions (v. 35a) and then back again (v. 35b), this must be the issue he is addressing. (That Paul switches back and forth from one subject to another is made unlikely by the fact that he predicates v. 35a on v. 35b, 'for it is inappropriate.')

<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Paul never specifically addresses women's silence concerning prophesying or speaking in tongues. Paul acknowledged that women could both pray and prophesy in public, as seen in 1 Cor. 11:5a where he says, "but any woman who prays or prophesies," revealing his awareness that women were, in fact, praying and prophesying during church services, just like the men. James Dunn points out that if women were able to prophesy, "where else would prophets prophesy, and to whom else would they prophesy than to other believers?"<sup>4</sup> What Dunn is revealing is that prophesying during this period was for the strengthening of the church, and women would have been prophesying in the church to the congregants.

If there were women praying and prophesying in the church, then there must be an explanation for an instance in which Paul decides to silence the women. Within six different translations of this passage, from the ESV, NRSV, NIV, ASV, NLT, and ISV, verse 35 explicitly mentions women asking their

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<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 81.

<sup>4</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *1 Corinthians* (New York: Clark International, 2003), 75.

“husbands at home” if they have any questions or desires to learn something during the church service. The New Oxford Annotated Bible’s commentary on 1 Cor. 14 notes that if this statement is original to the text, then Paul must only be addressing married women. This view is supported by Paul’s language in chapters 7 and 11, where Paul speaks directly to wives and husbands, instead of just women in general. He has addressed married women before, so it should come as no surprise that he does so again. Keith Burton also recognized this, saying that “Paul makes it plain that the women in question had ‘husbands’—which would naturally make them ‘wives.’”<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Spurgeon argues that in this instance, Paul doesn’t seem to be differentiating between ‘wives’ and ‘women’ in general, and instead offers that the word ‘husbands’ that most translations hold literally means ‘their own men,’ which could be better understood to mean the husbands, fathers, brothers, etc. Though Spurgeon’s analysis discredits the argument that Paul refers only to women that are married, Paul nevertheless addresses a specific issue: that women are being disruptive and distracting during gatherings, which could ultimately lead to shame for them or their families.

#### THE UNKNOWN PRACTICE IN CORINTH

Again, we ask: Why is Paul telling women to not be disruptive in the church if they were also able to pray and prophesy in it? Though the reasoning behind Paul’s silencing of women has evaded generations of scholars because of its lack of concrete and clear explanation, there are notable hypotheses about what Paul is aiming to accomplish in the passage. Three of these examples are as follows: Paul is offering a rebuttal, the passage is an interpolation, or it is a command to only the Corinthian women, not women in general. Each of these hypotheses will be explained in greater detail below.

It is important to understand the cultural context of Paul and the Corinthians in order to understand his proscription against women speaking in church. As Eliezer Gonzalez mentions, during this period in Greco-Roman society, women were expected to keep away from most forms of public behavior, and they were also excluded from the religious and political arenas.<sup>6</sup> In many instances, speaking during church was seen as non-submissive behavior, and being non-submissive could bring shame and embarrassment. As Burton mentions, an important contextual piece of reading this letter is that “the original audience was affected by the cultural influence of the Judaism and paganism of the first century Greco-Roman world.”<sup>7</sup> Paul’s readers did not live separately from the world, but they were both surrounded and affected by the societies that

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<sup>5</sup> Keith A. Burton, “1 Corinthians 11 and 14: How Does a Woman Prophecy and Keep Silence at the Same Time?,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10 (1999): 281.

<sup>6</sup> Eliezer Gonzalez, “Gender and Shame in Paul’s Churches: Intersections between Theology and Culture,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 22 (2011): 51.

<sup>7</sup> Burton, “1 Corinthians 11 and 14,” 271.

they were a part of. These societies were honor-based, and shame played an important role in mediating social norms. Thus, it is worth examining what Paul means when he speaks of shame. Burton mentions that Paul uses the same word for “shameful” in v. 35b of 1 Cor. 14 as he does in v. 6 of 1 Cor. 11, which refers to the shame that a woman with shaven hair incurs. The use of the same word demonstrates the intense social embarrassment and ridicule that could indeed be a distraction for other worshipers in the church, thus suggesting why Paul would have written this part of his letter.<sup>8</sup>

Paul’s words of “women should be silent in the churches” must be examined because of the shame and embarrassment that could accompany being disruptive during church and Paul’s lack of direct explanation for his words. As mentioned above, the three perspectives that scholars generally take to understand Paul’s directive are that the passage was a rebuttal, an interpolation, or a command directed only to Corinthian women. Each of these probable ideas will be examined in order to wrestle with the fact that Paul was not merely silencing all women in the church, but instead was pointing out a flaw in the Corinthian church.

#### PAUL’S REBUTTAL

One way of understanding what Paul meant in vv. 34-36 is the idea that he is paraphrasing what he knows of the Corinthian people’s behavior, followed by his rebuttal. What Charles Talbert notes is that the type of speech used in these three verses is a dialogue that Paul is having between himself and the Corinthians. In vv. 34-35, he is quoting the Corinthians’ words, leading to his refutation in v. 36 of which he questions the authority that the Corinthians have in silencing women.<sup>9</sup> Beth Barr offers a similar view in describing how Paul quotes the sayings of Gentile practices in 1 Cor. 6 and 7 and follows them with a rebuttal. By establishing that Paul has pointed out deficient practices in the Corinthian church, Barr asserts that Paul’s sentiment in vv. 34-36 is another one of those instances.<sup>10</sup>

To expand upon Barr’s similarities with Talbert’s ideas, her use of textual criticism establishes a connection between chapters 6, 17, and 14. In chapter 6, Paul speaks directly to the Corinthians about sexual immorality, something of which he had been made aware. In vv. 12–13, he uses the words “you say” multiple times, showing that he is quoting the Corinthians. After quoting the words of the Gentiles, he provides a correctional statement that is meant to change their actions. In chapter 7, Paul uses the same form of speech about marriage and divorce. In v. 1, Paul speaks about the matters in which they wrote, and in v. 2 he

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<sup>8</sup> Burton, “1 Corinthians 11 and 14,” 282.

<sup>9</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, Reading the New Testament 7 (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 91–95.

<sup>10</sup> Beth A. Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 40.

uses the form of “but since this is the case, this is what should happen.” The style of rebuttal that is apparent in chapters 6 and 7 is not as explicit in chapter 14, however, the notion of Paul offering a rebuttal is plausible, given that he had used it multiple times in the same letter.

#### WAS IT AN INTERPOLATION?

Another way of understanding Paul’s apparent command is as a marginal gloss or interpolation. Gordon Fee’s *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* champions this view. Fee argues that because the text has been accidentally or consciously placed both after v. 33 and after v. 40 it may not have been a part of Paul’s original writing. He also argues that since the gloss seemingly contradicts chapter 11 and interrupts the chapter at hand, it most likely is not original.<sup>11</sup> Spurgeon says that “(1) Some Western manuscripts trans-posed 14:34-35 to the end of the chapter, after verse 40, thus sug-gesting that the scribes debated the Pauline authorship and placement of these verses. (2) Placing this passage along with a discussion of spiritual gifts and prophesying seems odd. (3) Some of the concepts in this section may not seem characteristic of Paul.”<sup>12</sup> Marion Soards also adds to this by saying that “while the manuscript evidence is not strong, it does show both some scribes dealing with the illogical intrusion of these verses in the discussion of worship from the perspective of tongues and prophecy.”<sup>13</sup> The complexity of transcribing material during the first few centuries AD is apparent throughout manuscripts that have many interpolations and marginal glosses. This view argues that because the passage is seemingly out of place or because it seems to be contradictory to what women were allowed to do, it must have been an interpolation by a later scribe or redactor.

Curt Niccum offers a counterargument to the interpolation hypothesis. Looking at the same texts examined by Fee, Niccum concludes that the scribe of Codex Fuldensis used two manuscripts in his writing and placed the words from the texts being copied in the margin because they seemed to have differed from the earlier texts. Niccum notes that “the transposition occurs in only a few, closely related MSS from northern Italy spread abroad in the Middle Ages by Irish monastics. No other reading has a claim to being 'original' other than that preserving the traditional sequence of verses.”<sup>14</sup> Niccum’s view counters that of Fee and other scholars by re-examining the primary sources and finding a connection that other scholars had missed. This is important with regard to the

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<sup>11</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 699–702.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew B. Spurgeon, “Pauline Commands and Women in 1 Corinthians 14,” *BSAC* 168 (2011): 320.

<sup>13</sup> Marion L. Soards, *1 Corinthians*, NIBCNT 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 303.

<sup>14</sup> Curt Niccum, “The Voice of the Manuscripts on the Silence of Women: The External Evidence for 1 Cor 14.34–5,” *NTS* 43 (1997): 246, 255.

interpolation theory, as the scribe of Codex Fuldensis clearly was doing their best to incorporate two separate works in their rendition of the letter to the Corinthians.

While Fee, Spurgeon, and Soards offer theories that do not go in-depth with the original sources, Niccum's research of the texts themselves seems to imply that the passage is likely not an interpolation. Though the unusual disconnection between some of the early manuscripts is odd, the research on Codex Fuldensis shows that only a few early manuscripts placed the text in different positions. With this in mind, the hypothesis that 1 Corinthians 14:31-35 was a marginal interpolation can be refuted.

#### A COMMAND, BUT NOT A UNIVERSAL DIRECTIVE

The final way of understanding this passage is to view these authentic Pauline words as being written to a singular, specific church, and not all churches. Because of the sanctity of the word of God, the literalism that one can draw from Paul silencing women here is the stance that many churches rely upon for their doctrine. This theory shares features with the hypothesis of the passage being a rebuttal, but only with added nuance. Burton says, "our task would have been a lot easier if Paul had not been so silent about what exactly he means by women being silent."<sup>15</sup> The ambiguity must be dealt with, and the theory of this passage being authentic Pauline words aimed at a specific audience for a particular action seems to be the most fitting way of understanding Paul's command.

Spurgeon offers the suggestion that Paul was directing his aim at the Corinthian women specifically as they had been imitating Greek prophetesses, who would have been seen uncovering their heads, prophesying freely, and thus exalting themselves. He suggests that Paul wanted to restrain these women from doing as much, which would have led to shame for themselves and their husbands.<sup>16</sup> This is a shame that would not only manifest in their own community, but in neighboring communities as well. Paul's letters were generally read aloud in the churches, and they were also passed around and copied from church to church. Because of this, other churches that eventually received this letter were also made aware of the disruption within the Corinthian church. This gave them the opportunity to correct the malpractice if it was also occurring in their own church.

On the contrary, Burton claims that "unlike the female prophets who were making spiritual revelations, these wives were asking questions that demanded answers," which would have led to a small gathering of multiple pairs of husbands and wives speaking about what was going on.<sup>17</sup> Paul does explicitly say, "as in all of the churches of the saints," which could point to a universal directive.

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<sup>15</sup> Burton, "1 Corinthians 11 and 14," 280.

<sup>16</sup> Spurgeon, "Pauline Commands and Women," 322.

<sup>17</sup> Burton, "1 Corinthians 11 and 14," 281.

This addition should be seen as encouraging the Corinthian women to choose to not disrupt service because not being disruptive is something that is already being practiced by other churches. The idea that this is an encouragement fits into Paul's theme of exhorting the church to strengthen its members. Because the letters of Paul were passed among other churches in the surrounding areas, it is necessary to understand that Paul's silencing of women's disruptive behavior could be used in them all for the purpose of establishing much-needed order.

Keener argues that Paul could have been saying, "if you can't learn it in church except the way you're doing it, you need to ask your husbands at home." He continues by adding that instead of Paul saying, "let women learn only from their husbands at home, and not in the church services," he says, "don't learn *so loudly* in church!" Keener then offers the parallel of this view to what Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:34. He says that it is understandable to be hungry before taking the Lord's Supper, but it is better to eat before coming to church in order to keep free from disruption. Additionally, Keener argues that in 1 Cor. 14:28–29, Paul is saying that the practice of silence is preferred to the use of spiritual gifts if the gifts would not be used for the building of the church.<sup>18</sup> The disruption of the Corinthian women was something that Paul, with his status in the Christian community, wanted to correct. Thus, Keener offers substantial evidence that Paul was guiding Corinthian women away from shame within their community, instead of writing this as though it were a direct command to be followed by all women for all time. In light of the juxtaposition of chapters 11 and 14, the argument that Paul meant to silence the disruption of Corinthian women specifically is the most plausible conclusion.

#### WOMEN AND PROPHECY

Paul knew of and encouraged many women in the church. To name a few, in Romans he mentions Priscilla (16:3), Mary (16:6), the mother of Rufus (16:13), Julia (16:15), and many more throughout his writings. It is evident that Paul affirmed women and their roles in the church. As mentioned above, in 1 Cor. 11, specifically v. 5, Paul refers to "any woman who prays or prophesies," showing his acknowledgment of women that would pray or prophesy within the church. This acknowledgment without a direct quotation that women should not pray or prophesy reveals that Paul knew of and accepted women that were speaking and leading in the church.

In chapter 12, Paul references the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given members of the church. He mentions wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, and interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). Paul doesn't explicitly mention a hierarchy of these gifts, but Paul does say, "pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may

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<sup>18</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 72.



prophecy” (1 Corinthians 14:1 NRSV). He goes on in v. 3 to say that “those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” Paul reveals his stance here: prophecy is one of the highest gifts because of the encouragement and strength that it gives to the church. Knowing Paul’s outlook on prophecy and his support for women that pray and prophesy publicly, it would be inaccurate to dismiss women from taking on roles in the church today as many contemporary churches tend to do.

#### CONCLUSION

The use of 1 Corinthians 14:31-35 to silence women is rooted in a misunderstanding. It fails to account for Paul’s knowledge of many women in the same region that were praying and prophesying in the church. To misinterpret him in this way is to undermine Paul’s point that women can in fact pray and prophesy and would also limit the gifts of the spirit. The purpose of this passage is to exhort the women at Paul’s church plant in Corinth, and in the larger scope of the letter, to give guidelines for orderly worship. Those that stumble upon this passage should use it to reform actions during church services that are disruptive, not silence women in those services.

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