

# 25

## "Women Should Remain Silent"

- 1 Co 14:34

Correctly applying 1 Co 14:33b-35 is a challenge, regardless of whether one is involved with the house church movement or the traditional church. The NIV translates this passage as follows: "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."

### Pre-emptive Strikes

Before attempting to explain what this passage means, we first need to make some general, preliminary observations about the text. First, whatever Paul meant, he intended it for "all" congregations "everywhere." Some have attempted to side-step the entire passage by relegating its application to a uniquely Corinthian problem. Since it was written only to that particular church, they argue, we need not concern ourselves with applying it to today's church. The error of this type of reasoning is evident from the words of Paul himself. In 1 Co 1:1-3 Paul makes it clear that this letter is to "all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." The plot is further thickened by the reference in 14:33b to "all the congregations of the saints" and by the word "churches" (plural) in 14:34. Paul is appealing to the universal practice of the church as a whole.

Second, whatever this passage means, it is not just Paul's opinion, nor dare we ignore it. Others have wiggled out of dealing with this passage by dismissing it as simply Paul's opinion. Anticipating the unpopularity of his "opinion" about the role of women in the church, Paul added, "if anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command" (14:37). Then he warned, "if he ignores this, he himself will be ignored" (14:38).

Third, Paul's core command is that women remain "silent" (14:34) in church meetings. The word "silent" is from *sigao* and means the absence of all noise, whether made by speaking or by anything else (BAGD). *Sigao* is also used twice prior to 14:34, in 14:28 and 14:30. Tongue speakers should keep "quiet" if there is no interpreter present, and prophets should "stop" if a revelation comes to someone else (*sigao* is used in each instance); no sound was to be made by either under certain circumstances.

Fourth, it is important to observe that the context surrounding this passage concerns order in the church meeting (14:40). The over-arching rule is that only one person at a time should address the congregation. Speaking is to be "one at a time" (14:27) and "in turn" (14:31). Thus, whatever this passage means, it concerns a woman's silence with respect to being the only one speaking to the assembly. It would therefore not apply to congregational singing, corporate responses, private conversations, or fellowship during the Lord's Supper (1 Co 11:17-35).

### Two Views

Within our fellowship, two views prevail as to the exact meaning of Paul's words in this passage. The first is the "always silent" view, which understands Paul to be teaching that there is never a time when a woman should address the plenary meeting. The second is the "sometimes silent" view, which holds that a woman may indeed speak to the church, except when a prophecy is being verbally judged. According to this view a woman must be silent only with respect to judging prophecy (be sure to read the chapter entitled "I Do Not Permit A Woman To Teach").

### The "Always Silent" View

In support of "always silent" view it should be observed that the reference to women prophesying in 1 Co 11:3-16 is harmonized with 14:33b-35 by noting that nowhere does the text state that 11:3-16 has a meeting of the church in view. The prayer and prophecy of 11:3-16 is evidently to go on at a time or location other than in the assembly (as in Lk 2:21-38 and Ac 21:7-11). The word "churches" (11:16) is taken to refer not to church meetings, but to the totality of Christians living in various geographic locations. Just as none of the "churches" would have condoned adultery (which obviously would not be committed in the actual assembly), neither did they have a custom such as making women wear a garment over their heads when praying or prophesying (see chapter entitled "She Should Cover Her Head").

Further, notice the seeming absoluteness of 1 Co 14:33b-35. As has already been shown, the Greek behind "silent" (*sigao*) genuinely means "mute." This is in contrast to another word Paul could have used (*hesuchia*) which usually means "silent" in the sense of tranquil, calm, or settled down, but not necessarily mute (see 2 Th 3:12; 1 Tm 2:2, 11-12).

Moreover, as if to anticipate that someone might misunderstand his words, Paul added, "they are not allowed to speak" (14:34). He does not write "speak in tongues" nor "speak a prophecy" nor "speak a judgment" nor "speak a teaching." No qualifier is added. The women are not to speak anything. In fact, they are not even to ask a question in church (14:35), because "it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."

An examination of first-century cultural norms would also suggest that Paul intended for women to be "always silent." First, in Jewish synagogues women were not allowed to speak publicly. Also, 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 (Reinecker, *Linguistic Key*, 438). Throughout the pagan world, women were generally regarded as inferior to men (Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 774). Thus, if Paul had intended for women to be allowed to speak in church, would he then not have had to write extensively to convince his readers of such an abnormal practice? However, no such arguments can be found in the NT. Instead, there is the command for silence; a command not based on the culture of Paul's day, but upon the universal practice of all the churches and upon the Hebrew Scriptures (the "law," v 34). Paul certainly did assert the equality of the sexes in Ga 3:28 (in contrast with first-century culture), but he still maintained the subordination of women to men (1 Co 14:34; 1 Tm 2:11-13).

One difficulty with the "always silent" view can be seen in the church discipline process of Mt 18:15-20. In one of the last steps of the correction process, the "church" is to be told of the sin of the unrepentant brother. With the "always silent" scenario, no sister could ever be among those who "tell it to the whole church," nor serve as one of the "witnesses." If the person being charged with an offense happens to be female, she would not be permitted to speak in defense of herself. This would seem to be an awkward way to handle such a serious matter.

Another problem with the "always silent" view concerns Paul's intent in writing this passage. Exactly what is accomplished by complete silence on the part of women? There seems to be no substantive basis behind a command for unconditional silence. Suppose an informal prayer meeting is held in a home (as in 1 Co 11:2-16) and the whole house church attends. Since it is not intended to be an "official" 1 Co 14 style of meeting, the women presumably could participate verbally. However, if those same people were to come to a home where a 1 Co 14 meeting is intended, then, according to the "always silent" view, the women could not pray aloud. But what is the fundamental difference between the two meetings that would allow women to speak in one case but force women to remain silent in the other case? The number of people who are in attendance has not changed. The setting has not changed (it's in the home in either case). Perhaps the difference lies in the purpose behind the gathering (see chapter entitled "I Will Build My Church").

Despite the above mentioned concerns, the "always silent" view is the one toward which I am inclined. It is the simplest and most straightforward application of 14:33-34. How much stronger or more obviously could Paul have written? He is obnoxiously clear. In our feministic, egalitarian, evangelical culture it is inconvenient to heed such "chauvinistic" injunctions. However, "let God be true, and every man (or woman) a liar" (Ro 3:4)!

### The "Sometimes Silent" View

Those in favor of the "sometimes silent" view regard 1 Co 11:2-16 as occurring in a church meeting. This is because the instructions immediately following this passage, 11:17-34 (concerning the Lord's Supper), clearly do deal with a "church meeting." Thus, in 11:2 the Corinthians are praised for what they did rightly in their meetings, and in 11:7 they are chided for what they did wrongly in their meetings. The seeming contradiction that is thus created between 1 Co 11:2-16 (women allowed to speak) and 14:33b-35 (women forbidden to speak) is resolved by understanding the "silence" in 14:33b-35 to be conditional. Women may speak if their statements are "in submission" (14:34). If, however, their utterances would entail passing judgment upon prophecies spoken in the meeting, then under this condition the women must be silent. Thus they only have to be silent sometimes, but not always.

Specifically, 14:33b-35 ("remain silent") is taken to apply to the judging of the various prophecies mentioned in 14:29-33a. In 14:29a, Paul commands that two or three prophets should speak; he then regulated the prophecy in 14:30-33a. In 14:29b, Paul ordered that the prophecies be carefully judged. He then regulated the judgment in 14:30b-35. Thus, just as tongue speakers are to be "silent" under certain circumstances (14:28-i.e., only with regard to speaking in tongues when there is no interpreter present), and just as the prophets are to be "silent" under certain circumstances (14:30-i.e., only with regard to prophecy when another prophet receives a revelation), so women are to remain "silent" under certain circumstances (14:33b-35-i.e., only with regard to the judging of prophecies). This interpretation, unlike the "always silent" view, gives substance to the reason behind the command. For women to judge prophecy in the church would be to assume an authoritative posture and, hence, would be to violate the requirement to be in submission found elsewhere in the Scriptures (cf. 1 Ti 2:11-13 and Paul's allusion to "the law" in 1 Co 14:34). Notice how Paul links the silence of women in this passage to "submission" (14:34), indicating that this "silence" is in regard to exercising authority. Accordingly, women are not allowed to quiz, question, or interrogate the prophets as to their orthodoxy. To do so would place them in a position of authority over the prophets. Instead, they should ask their men at home, after the meeting, as to why certain prophecies went unchallenged (14:35).

Given the difficulties of correctly applying 1 Co 14:33b-35, we must be careful to respect those who hold to applications which differ from our position. Whatever position one eventually takes on this issue, we can not simply stick our heads in the sand and pretend this passage does not exist. As Paul wrote, "If he ignore this, he himself will be ignored" (14:38).

- S.A.

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