

## Un-Silencing the Women

### **Text**

1 Corinthians 14:34-38 Old King James

34 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. 35 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. 36 What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? 37 If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. 38 But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.

### **Introduction**

Recently, these passages have been brought to my attention in light of women speaking at Christ the King Church. Since, there are differing opinions about these passages, I thought it might be beneficial for the members of the church if I wrote a paper expressing what I believe.

I shall begin by stating in summary what I believe and then list the four interpretations of these passages and follow with a detailed explanation for my belief.

### **Summary:**

I believe that in verses 34 and 35 Paul is repeating back to men, who thought women should be silenced in church, their position and then challenging them in verse 36 with the questions: What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?

Before I explain in detail why I believe this let me list the four interpretations of these passages.

### **Four Interpretations**

#### **1. Absolute Silence**

This interpretation says that Paul placed an absolute ban on women speaking in church.

The basis for absolute silence is the law and not some cultural condition in Corinth. Those who espouse this position say the law teaches female silence and the law that Paul referred to was the account of creation.

The Lutheran commentator, R.C. Lenski represents this position. He wrote, "This prohibition is general and complete....Thus the Law, the Old Testament, subjects woman to man by the very act of creation before the fall and again because of the fall, when woman first ignored this subjection." Lenski, *Interpretation of First Corinthians* 615-616.

## **2. Limited Silence**

This interpretation affirms that something disruptive was occurring in the church, so that, Paul had to correct an abuse with limited silence.

Various speculative scenarios are put forth. One of the more common scenarios is that in the church the sexes were separated just as they were in synagogues. The women, who would not have been educated, were hollering questions across the aisle to their husbands. This would have caused a disruption that was shameful and Paul addressed this abuse by silencing questions in church and telling women to ask their husbands at home.

Another scenario is that the limited silence had nothing to do with speaking in general but in speaking to judge prophecy. This view, though not as common, is put forth by D.A. Carson. He wrote, "Women, of course, may participate in such prophesying; that was established in chapter 11. Paul's point here, however, is that they may not participate in the oral weighing of such prophecies." Carson, "Silent in the Church," *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood* 151.

According to this interpretation, whatever the scenario, the silence was limited to the correction of an abuse.

## **3. No Silence**

This position affirms that these passages were not written by Paul and should not be in the Bible. Therefore they have nothing to say about silence.

The reason for this is because these passages contradict what Paul wrote about women prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11 and the reference to the Law without a specific citation is contrary to Paul's use of the law. Those who do not believe that Paul wrote these verses affirm that Paul never used law as a basis for church worship, therefore someone else must have added these verses. They speculate that the person was probably a Jewish Christian.

Gordon Fee, the commentator in the New International Critical Commentary, summarized this argument. He wrote, "The case against these verses is so strong, and finding a viable solution to their meaning so difficult, that it seems best to view them as an interpolation." Fee, *1 Corinthians: New International Commentary* 705.

## **4. Imposed Silence**

This position affirms that certain men in the church wanted to impose silence on the women and that Paul repeated their position and then rejected it.

This view was put forth by David Odell-Scott. He wrote, "What! Did the word of God originate with you or are you (men) the only ones it has reached? The inquiry of v. 36 is a refutation of

the self-righteous assumptions of the men voiced in vv. 33b-35.” Odell-Scott, “Let the Women Speak in Church: An Egalitarian Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b-36” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 13 (1983) 92.

### **Response to the four**

I reject the absolute silence interpretation because it contradicts other scriptures and the reference to the law is too ambiguous to outweigh the clear scriptures on women prophesying, praying, etc.

I think there is some merit to the interpretation that Paul imposed a limited silence because of abuse. However, I cannot find any evidence that the ancient church followed the synagogue seating model. And the idea that silence only extended to judging prophecy is still based on a prohibition connected to the order of creation, which remains vague. Therefore, if there was a disruptive situation we are left to speculate what it might have been.

I am not qualified to determine if these passages were not originally written by Paul. I respect the scholars who question these passages. They have some good reasons but I am of a temperament that says unless we are sure the passages were not in some ancient manuscripts, we had better leave them in the Bible.

I find the fourth interpretation that says Paul rejected an imposed silence on women to be the most compelling.

To understand this we need to look at the details of the passages.

### **Details**

Let's begin by looking at the opening phrase: “Let your women keep silence in the church.” From this we can deduce two things. One is that Paul is addressing the men regarding the women. The next phrase, “For it is not permitted unto them to speak” confirms this. “Them” is in the third person, which makes the men the second person being addressed by the first person i.e., Paul.

The second thing we can deduce is that Paul is addressing men about the role of women in the church. Therefore the primary focus of these passages is about men and women in the church.

Next, we need to look at the reasons that are put forth to command female silence in the church. The translators have punctuated the “Let your women keep silence in the church” with a colon at the end. The colon indicates that what follows will explain the basis for the silence.

The Greek text does not have punctuation. The Greek simply uses the word “for” to introduce the causal connection between the assertion and the reasons. There are two “for” in the phrases that follow that explain the reasons that are put forth to command silence and each of these could be translated as “because.”

The King James translates it: “**For** [because] 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** [because] it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

We will address these as two separate reasons that are joined together with a conjunction to give a fuller picture.

The two reasons are (1) because the law commands silence and (2) because it is a shame for women to speak in church. Simply stated, the law and shame are the two reasons for female silence.

No one can specifically cite which law Paul might be referring to (assuming Paul is referring to an Old Testament Law). Some writers say that Paul is referring to the order of creation in Genesis 2 and 3, and therefore Paul made a general reference to the law and not a specific citation.

The problem with this is that there is nothing in the creation account that commands women to be silent in church.

This would be a huge prohibition based on a vague general reference to the law, and this is out of character for Paul. When he cites the law to affirm or condemn something, he gives specific references. For example, earlier in this very chapter he quoted Isaiah 28:11: “In the law it is written: With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,” says the Lord” (1 Corinthians 14:21).

After stating “in the law it is written,” Paul quoted a specific passage. This was Paul’s style. He was very careful with how he used the law. He wrote Timothy, “The law is good if it is used lawful, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless” (1 Timothy 1:8-9).

I don’t find Paul making general references to the law to establish any practices of the church. Therefore, I am not convinced that Paul is referring to any Old Testament passage as the reason for women to be silent in church.

If, instead of assuming, that Paul refers to the Old Testament law, we consider that he refers to the oral law of Judaism, it would correspond to rabbinic Judaism. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, wrote, “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive” (Josephus, C. Ap. 2.200-201).

Josephus was not referring to an Old Testament law. He was referring to rabbinic traditions associated with the law. These were viewed by Jews as oral law and quoted as the law.

I am not implying that Paul used rabbinic oral law as the basis for church practice. I am saying that some in the church wanted Jewish oral law to silence the woman and Paul repeats their position before he challenges it.

The second reason put forth for female silence was shame. Shame would have been a concern of men from Greek background as well as those from Jewish background. Greeks were concerned about keeping up appearances, i.e., public decorum.

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Charles Hodge says that the Greeks and Jews did not allow women to speak in public meetings. They considered it a shame.

Is it possible that Paul is also repeating the Greek concern about shame and not personally saying it is a shame for women to speak in church? If so, Paul was not affirming that it is a shame for women to speak in the church, but he was repeating their reasoning before he challenges it.

If the two reasons for female silence were not reasons at all but the reasoning of men who wanted to silence women, this would change the meaning of these passages completely.

But since this is so different, we must ask what might be the basis for viewing these passages in this way?

The answer to that question is found in the first word of the next passage—What?

What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? This is verse thirty-six and it immediately follows the reasons put forth for silencing the women. By writing “What?”, Paul is challenging these reasons and not affirming them.

The word “What” is a translation of the Greek particle  $\eta$ , which in English is spelt e. It can be translated as “What” or “or.” Older versions of the Bible translate it as “what” and newer versions translate as “or”.

The Revised Standard Version not only translates it as “What,” it also put an exclamation mark behind it to draw attention to the forcefulness of this question: “**What!** Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached? (1 Corinthians 14:36 RSV)

“What” or “or” are both correct and it depends on how the translators see the usage in relationship to the question that follows it. The question that follows the particle  $\eta$  is “came the word of God out from you? Or came it unto you only?”

How this particle is translated does not change the questions. It only changes the force of the introduction to the questions. The questions remain the same, and to understand what was being asked we need to determine to whom these questions were addressed.

These questions were addressed to someone in the church. Was it the whole church or just the men in the church? If Paul is addressing just the men then these questions directly challenge the previous reasons for female silence.

How can we determine this? Sometimes the gender spelling of a pronoun will give you a clue if a question or command is gender specific. For example the pronoun “them” in verse 34 is spelt in the feminine gender and it corresponds to the text about women.

But in verse 36, Paul used the neuter pronoun “you” twice. Unfortunately, this doesn’t tell us anything about whether he was being gender specific with his questions.

We do get a clue, however, from the adjective that Paul used to modify the second pronoun. Paul wrote “you only.” Grammatically, the adjective “only” would apply to both pronouns and it is spelt in the masculine gender.

This does not by itself determine that Paul was addressing men only with these questions. A masculine gender word can be used in a gender inclusive manner. However this section begins with Paul addressing the men about the women. Therefore why should we presume that Paul now shifts to including the women when he asked these questions?

There is nothing in the text that indicates that Paul changed from addressing the men about the women to addressing both genders of the whole church. Therefore these questions, I believe, are addressed to the men only.

After recounting their position, Paul asked the men, “What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you [men] only? ”

Of course the Jewish male thought this way, so that, this would fit the historical context. It also makes sense out the next verse: “If any man thinks himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord” (vs37).

Paul had already written that the women may prophesy, which means that they speak in church. Therefore, if someone wanted to silence the women based on the authority of oral law, Paul supersedes that by reminding them that what he wrote was the commandments of the Lord.

Paul then concludes, “But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant” (1Corinthians 14:34-38 KJV). The New International Version translates this as “If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.” This pretty much speaks for itself.

Now go back and read these passages with this background in mind and see if it doesn’t make sense.

**Conclusion:** This view may be new to you, and some, who rightfully reject a feminist approach to scripture, may mistake this view as supporting a gender neutral approach.

I do not believe the Bible is gender neutral, as can be seen from my approach to these scriptures. And I have no feminist agenda. The only question, to me, is what do these passages actually say?

I arrived at this conclusion after extensive study, and I would not say that this view is without its difficulties. The most significant is that Paul does not initially give indications that he is repeating their position and then responding to it.

However, after I looked at the larger context of 1 Corinthians, I found that this fit the pattern of Paul's dialogue with them.

At the beginning of chapter seven Paul referred to a letter that they had written him: "Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me" (1 Corinthians 7:1). From this point on, Paul responds to the things that were in their letter to him.

Even though he responds to them, he doesn't always precede his response with a quote from their letter. We might do that and it would have been nice if he did. Instead, he just gave his response.

Paul, in chapter fourteen, responded to abuses that he learned about from their letter. In this chapter he responds to the abuses of excessive tongues, uncontrolled prophets and people doing their own thing in church. He does this without citing the specifics of their letter.

He simply addresses their abuses and corrects it. For example, Paul wrote, "If the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind" (1 Corinthians 14:23). Paul didn't cite his source for knowing that they were all speaking in tongues. He just stated what was happening and corrected it.

He followed the same pattern with his instructions regarding silencing the women. He stated what they were doing and corrected it.

This follows the natural flow of dialogue between them and Paul. We, unfortunately, read the Bible as a monologue from God to us and jump into the middle their conversation.

But if we step back and look at the background, it's possible we might get a better picture.

When I look at these passages in this light, this interpretation makes sense to me. I hope it helps you.

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