

“Women Should Remain Silent”

a study of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Preface by Joseph Tkach

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul wrote: “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” (vv. 33-35).

If we take this literally, it would mean that women are not allowed to sing in church, nor respond when the pastor asks for comments or questions from the audience. Moreover, it would contradict what Paul said in chapter 11, where he said that women *could* pray and prophesy in church if they had the appropriate attire.

Common sense, church custom, and good principles of biblical interpretation all say that we should not take these verses literally—and almost no one does. Paul is not making a blanket prohibition that says that women can never speak in church. Rather, he was addressing his comments to a certain situation, and his comments are limited in some way. The question is, What are the limits of Paul’s prohibition? In the following paper, the doctrinal review team examines the context and looks at the details of these verses.

Joseph Tkach

A call to order

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul begins to instruct the Corinthian church about their somewhat disorganized worship services. As we studied in our previous paper, he says that women should wear a head covering when they pray and prophesy; then he corrects the Corinthians on the way they had been observing the Lord’s Supper. In chapter 12, he addresses the proper use of spiritual gifts in the worship service. He describes a number of gifts, and insists that all gifts are important to the Body of Christ; the variety of gifts calls for mutual respect and honor, not vanity or shame.

In chapter 13, he describes love as the best way, and in chapter 14 he makes

an extended contrast between the gift of tongues and the gift of prophesying. Apparently some people in Corinth were extolling the gift of tongues as a mark of superior spirituality. Paul did not tell them to stop speaking in tongues, but he did put some restrictions on how tongues should be used in the worship service:

- 1) There should be two or three speakers (14:27).
- 2) They should speak one at a time (v. 27).
- 3) There should be an interpretation (v. 27b). If no one can interpret the tongues, “the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God” (v. 28). However, this requirement should not be lifted out of its context to create a complete prohibition on the person ever speaking, singing or praying.¹

Paul is apparently trying to give some organization to what had been a rather chaotic worship meeting—several people speaking at once, speaking words that no one could understand.

Paul recommends the gift of prophecy as a far more helpful gift, but he gives similar guidelines for those speakers, too:

- 1) Only two or three should speak (v. 29). If someone else has something to say, the first speaker should be quiet.²
- 2) They should speak one at a time (v. 31).
- 3) People should “weigh carefully what is said” (v. 29; cf. 1 Thess. 5:21).

Paul notes that “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32). That is, the speakers are able to stop; they cannot use “God made me do it” as an excuse for adding to the commotion.³ When God gives a gift, he also gives the person the responsibility to make decisions to use that gift in an appropriate way. Simply having the gift is not an excuse to use it whenever and wherever the person wants to. Paul explains his reason: “For God is not a God

¹ Paul uses the same Greek word that is translated “silent” in v. 34. James Hurley notes that “there is no intention that the first [person] should speak no more in the worship service. He or she may certainly sing hymns, pray, etc.... Paul left it to his readers to grasp the context” (*Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* [Zondervan, 1981], 190).

² The NIV translation again obscures the fact that Paul has used the same Greek word for silence. And again, Paul did not intend to prohibit all subsequent speaking by the person—he called for silence only for the immediate situation.

³ This point probably applies to tongues-speakers, too. The Greek verb is *hypotassō*, here translated as “subject to the control of,” but more commonly translated as “submit.”

of disorder but of peace” (v. 33).

Paul⁴ then tells the women to be quiet, and to ask their questions at home: “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” (vv. 33-35).

Let’s examine some of the details in these verses.

Observations

1) The first thing we notice is that women are not the only people Paul tells to be “silent.” He uses the same word in verses 28 and 30 to tell tongue-speakers and prophets to be silent when others speak. In both of those verses, he is calling for a temporary silence, not a complete and permanent prohibition.⁵

2) The word for “speak” (*laleō*) does not necessarily mean a formal role in the pulpit—it is a general word that can also be translated “talk.” Paul used a general word to say that women should not talk, and we have to make an interpretive choice: Was he prohibiting formal speaking roles, or talk in the

⁴ Gordon Fee and a few other scholars have suggested that Paul did not write these verses—a small number of old manuscripts have these verses in a different place, as if they have been added to the text from a marginal comment. However, all manuscripts DO have these verses, and we accept them as part of the canonical epistle. Scribes occasionally made mistakes when they copied manuscripts, and corrections were written in the margin, and these corrections were sometimes incorporated into the text on subsequent copying, not always in the right place.

A few scholars have suggested that Paul is here quoting some Corinthians, and disagreeing with them, but this seems unlikely. These verses are neither stylistically or theologically like the other places where Paul probably quotes the Corinthians (e.g., 6:12-14). Neither hypothesis is necessary, for there are adequate explanations for why Paul would write these words.

⁵ “The question is, what kind of ‘silence’ does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 14:34? It cannot be silence of all speech... Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, just three chapters earlier, that women who pray and prophesy should have their heads covered, which assumes that they could pray and prophesy aloud in church services” (Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* [Multnomah, 2004], 232-33). Similarly, Craig Keener writes, “Once you protest that Paul did not mean to prohibit *all* speaking, you have already raised the interpretive question of what he actually did mean in his historical context and how it might be applied in our context today” (“Women in Ministry,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* [ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg; Zondervan, 2001], 41).

audience,⁶ or something else?

3) Paul says that instead of speaking, women should be in submission. This implies that the Corinthian women were speaking in an insubordinate way. The fact that Paul said in chapter 11 that women could pray and prophesy, and in chapter 14 that two or three people could prophesy in a worship service, shows that women are allowed to have a slot in the speaking schedule. It is not insubordinate for them to speak prophecies; it is therefore likely that Paul is prohibiting some less-formal speaking, such as chatter or comments from the audience.⁷

4) Paul says that “the Law” requires submission. There are several options for what kind of submission is meant:

- a) submission of all women to all men. However, as we saw in previous studies, the Old Testament does not require all women to submit to all men, nor does it require them to be silent. Nevertheless, some scholars believe that Paul is alluding to a “principle” derived from Genesis.⁸

⁶ Craig Blomberg suggests this as a possibility: “Perhaps they were ‘chattering,’ or even gossiping, as some Jewish women...reputedly liked to do” in the synagogues (*1 Corinthians* [NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 1994], 280).

⁷ Grudem writes, “There is nothing in 1 Corinthians that says women were being disruptive” (243). That is technically true—but it is also true that nothing in the epistle says that tongue-speakers were causing problems, either. Paul describes that problem in conditional clauses: “If I did this... *If* everyone spoke in tongues... *If* you are praising God with your spirit...” Despite this style of argumentation, scholars generally agree that Paul is dealing with a real situation. His instructions imply a problem that he was trying to correct; so also with his comments about women.

⁸ Josephus says that Scripture taught women to submit (*Against Apion* 2:24), and it was probably widely assumed that it did, though specific verses could not be cited. The idea is that the male has authority over the female either because he was created first (Genesis 2) or because subordination was part of the curse against the woman (Genesis 3). Historically, most scholars have cited the curse, but traditional scholars today generally base their explanations on Genesis 2, perhaps because they do not want to say that women in Christ are subject to the curse. Garland writes, “Gen. 3:16 is predictive, not prescriptive, and Jewish exegetes did not ground the subordination of women in the creation narrative” (*1 Corinthians*, 672). Hurley says that Paul “uniformly appealed to the relation of Adam and Eve *before* the fall rather than after it, to Genesis 2 rather than to Genesis 3” (192).

However, even if the first man had authority because of being created first, it is far from clear in Genesis whether 1) all subsequent males have authority over all subsequent females, or 2) their authority is limited to spiritual matters, or 3) is limited to marriage. The Old Testament gives examples of women who had some authority over men in civil and religious matters.

- b) submission of *wives* to their *husbands*.⁹ Although this command is not explicitly found in the Old Testament, the presence of the command in the New Testament¹⁰ suggests that it was based on Old Testament principles. Further, v. 35 indicates that Paul may have been dealing with a husband-wife problem. However, if Paul is alluding to a rule about family relationships, it would not necessarily apply to authority in the church.
- c) submission to a Roman law that restricted women's roles in pagan worship.¹¹ Although Paul normally means the Mosaic law when he uses the word *nomos*, it is possible that he meant civil law in this verse; the Corinthians would know by context which law he meant.
- d) submission to themselves. Just as Paul told the prophets to control themselves (v. 32), he uses the same Greek word in v. 34 to say that women should be in submission; the proximity of these two uses suggests that Paul means for women to control themselves. The New American Standard Bible translates v. 34b in this way: "let them subject themselves, just as the Law says."¹² In this case the "law" could be either

⁹ The Greek words for *man* and *woman* often mean husband and wife; the meaning is determined by the context. Gordon Fee notes that one ancient manuscript adds "to their husbands," but he comments, "It is not at all clear that this is what the author intended" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [New International Commentary on the New Testament; Eerdmans, 1987], 699).

¹⁰ E.g., Eph. 5:22. As discussed in a previous paper, Paul balances this command with the admonition for husbands to love their wives in a self-sacrificial way (v. 25).

¹¹ "Official religion of the Roman variety was closely supervised. The women who participated were carefully organized and their activities strictly regulated" (Linda Belleville, "Women in Ministry," in Beck and Blomberg, 119). Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger cite Plutarch, Cicero, and Livy for evidence that Rome had laws regulating the behavior of women in worship ("Pandemonium and Silence at Corinth," *Reformed Journal* 28 [June 1978], p. 9). References are Plutarch, *Lives*, on Solon; Cicero, *Laws*, II.xv; Livy, XXXIX.xv; and Phintys, *Stobaeus*, IV.23.61.

¹² "'Submission' and 'silence' are two sides of the same coin. To be silent is to be submissive—and to be submissive (in the context of worship) is to be silent. Control over the tongue is most likely what Paul is talking about" (Belleville, 119). The idea is that when Paul told women to be in submission, he meant the same thing as when he told prophets to be in submission. Ralph Martin writes, "What Paul is rebuking is the way women were upsetting the good order of the worship.... The merit of this view is that it enables us to take 'be in subjection' as referring not

Roman law or general biblical principles of decency and order.

5) Paul addresses the problem by saying, “If they want to inquire about something . . .” This implies that the problem in Corinth concerning the asking of questions with a desire to *learn* something.¹³ Blomberg suggests, “Perhaps the largely uneducated women of that day were interrupting proceedings with irrelevant questions that would be better dealt with in their homes.”¹⁴ Belleville says, “Their fault was not in the asking per se but in the inappropriate setting for their questions.”¹⁵

6) Paul says that the women “should ask their own husbands at home.”¹⁶

to their husbands but to their own spirits” (*The Spirit and the Congregation* [Eerdmans, 1984], 85).

¹³ The Greek word is *manthanō*, usually translated “learn.” The NASB translates it literally: “If they desire to learn anything . . .”

¹⁴ Blomberg, 280. Although some first-century women were well-educated, most were not. They married young and stayed at home. Keener advocates this as the primary problem—the women were “speaking up, asking questions to learn what was going on during the prophecies or the Scripture exposition in church. . . . The women are interrupting the Scripture exposition with questions. This would have caused an affront to more conservative men or visitors to the church, and it would have also caused a disturbance to the service due to the nature of the questions. . . .”

“Plutarch says that it is important to ask lecturers questions only in their field of expertise; to ask them questions irrelevant to their discipline is rude. Worse yet are those who challenge the speaker without yet understanding his point. . . . This principle is particularly applicable to uneducated questioners who waste everyone’s time with their questions they have not bothered to first research for themselves. . . . So also those who nitpick too much, questioning extraneous points not relevant to the argument.

“It was rude even to whisper to one another during a lecture, so asking questions of one another would also have been considered out of place and disrespectful to the speaker. Why would the women in the congregation have been more likely to have asked irrelevant questions than the men? Because, in general, they were less likely to be educated than men” (Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives*, 81-83). Schreiner also notes that Plutarch encouraged students to interrupt lectures with questions, and says that Paul would have been unfair to silence only the women (350-351). But Paul said that only one person should speak at a time; he probably did not want *anyone* to interrupt the speakers; he was not following the advice Plutarch gave for lectures.

¹⁵ Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* (Baker, 1999), 161.

¹⁶ Grudem notes that this does not necessarily imply that the women were asking *other* men. “When Paul says that wives should ‘submit to your *own* husbands, as to the Lord’ (Ephesians 5:22), does that imply that the wives at Ephesus were all submitting to other women’s husbands? Of course not” (244). However, 1 Cor. 14 is a more corrective passage than Eph. 5 is.

This may imply that the problems were caused primarily by women who were married to Christian men.¹⁷ Grudem is probably right in suggesting that Paul “assumes that the Corinthians can make appropriate applications for single women [or those married to pagans], who would no doubt know some men they could talk to after the service.”¹⁸ Paul is giving “husbands at home” as an illustration, not as a limitation on who can answer and where they must be. For example, it would be permissible to ask questions while walking home, or of other women, or of other men.¹⁹ Paul’s main point is, Don’t talk in church, not even to ask questions.

7) Paul says that it is “disgraceful” for women to talk in church. This word appeals to the Corinthians’ own sense of social propriety. He is saying that church custom (v. 33b), the law (v. 34), and social expectations (v. 35) all prohibit women from talking in church.²⁰ The questions themselves are not wrong, for they can be

¹⁷ D.A. Carson asks, “We must ask why Paul then bans *all* women from talking. And were there no noisy men?” (“Silent in the Churches,” in John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* [Crossway, 1991], 147). Grudem has a similar objection: “To say that only women and no men were disorderly is merely an assumption with no facts to support it” (246). However, we could equally ask why Paul forbids all questions, even though not all questions are disrespectful. See page 15 for evidence that Paul sometimes gives commands to an entire class of people when only some are the problems.

We can see in chapter 11 that Corinthian women had some behavioral problems that men did not have, and we have to consider the possibility that this might be true in chapter 14, too. We do not think that Paul unfairly singled women out; we therefore (in response to Carson’s question) conclude that women were the ones who happened to be causing a problem in Corinth by talking and asking questions. Since Greco-Roman culture gave men many opportunities for public meetings, but women had few, it is to be expected that women would have the most problems in what was for them a new situation. L. Ann Jervis writes, “Paul evidently singled out ‘the women’ here simply because in his eyes, they were the culprits in the situation” (“1 Corinthians 14.34-35: A Reconsideration of Paul’s Limitation of the Free Speech of Some Corinthian Women,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 58 [1995]: 71).

¹⁸ Grudem, 235. 1 Cor. 7 shows that the congregation included widows and other single women. We should not expect Paul to address every possible situation when that is not his main point.

¹⁹ If Paul is using “husbands at home” as an illustration, not as a prescription, which seems likely, then he is not dealing with a husband-wife problem.

²⁰ Craig Keener notes, “Whereas questions at public lectures were expected, ancient literature testified that unlearned questions were considered foolish and rude—and women generally possessed inadequate education and were most often unlearned” (51). Noisy or disorderly women would not be considered “in submission,” even if they were not breaking any particular command. “It would be particularly embarrassing to a husband for his wife to transgress social

asked at home, but it is disorderly to ask them in the worship service.

8) It is not clear whether “as in all the congregations of the saints” (v. 33b) introduces this topic, or concludes the previous one. Linda Belleville notes that in the other places Paul appeals to the practice of other churches, it is at the *end* of the discussion (1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 11:16), and it is redundant to have “in the churches” both in the introductory clause and at the end of the same sentence. As she notes, “‘Let the women...’ is a typical Pauline start to a new paragraph.”²¹ However, this does not seem to affect the interpretation of the verses. Either way, it seems that other churches were already doing what Paul wanted the Corinthians to do.

Church, law, and society

Paul has already indicated that women can pray and prophesy in church (chapter 11), and a worship service includes two or three people prophesying in turn (14:29-32). This means that it is permissible for women to have formal speaking roles in the church. Paul was apparently forbidding some other type of speech. Just as he did not allow tongue-speakers or prophets to speak out of turn, he did not want women to speak out of turn, saying things in such a way that they were breaking social customs about what is appropriate.

Paul appealed to church custom, the law, and cultural expectations; we will consider how each of these is relevant to the problem that Paul is dealing with.

1) We know very little about how first-century churches functioned, except for what the New Testament tells us—and the picture is one of variety. Some churches were led by apostles and elders; others by prophets and teachers; some by overseers or elders or deacons. Although we know the names of a number of influential men and women, we can associate those names with specific titles in only a few cases. We know even less about how a typical worship service was conducted; 1 Cor. 14 is the primary evidence.

2) We have surveyed the Old Testament, and find no prohibition on women

boundaries and question him in public. This behavior still makes persons uncomfortable in cultures that have an unwritten rule between spouses that one does not shame or embarrass the other in public” (David Garland, *1 Corinthians* [Baker, 2003], 670).

²¹ Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders*, 157-58. Garland expresses the majority view: “The repetition of *ekklesiai* seems clumsy, but it is easier to understand how church custom applies to a wife...than it does to the statement that God is a God of peace” (669-70).

speaking in public.²² Scripture provides examples of women who had leadership roles in civil government, in publicly praising God, and in giving authoritative answers about spiritual matters to male civil leaders (e.g., Deborah, Miriam, and Huldah). Scripture does not require all women to submit to all men. The problem in Corinth probably involved either a) wives speaking against or dishonoring their husbands,²³ or b) more generally, women acting disorderly and for that reason considered “not in submission.” The “law” that Paul mentions may be a civil law, or a New Testament rule.

3) In Greco-Roman society, women were given authority in the household, but rarely had opportunity for public speaking. Craig Keener notes a typical expectation: “Plutarch goes on to explain that a woman’s talk should also be kept private within the home...she ‘ought to do her talking either to her husband or through her husband.’”²⁴ The average woman was less educated and had little experience in public assemblies; this may have contributed to the problem in

²² Grudem suggests that Paul “seems to be referring to the Old Testament generally as ‘the Law,’ probably especially the Creation order in Genesis 2, and understanding it as teaching a principle of male leadership” (234). But as we discussed in an earlier paper, it is far from clear that Genesis 2 teaches a hierarchy based on sequence of creation. When scholars say that women are not allowed to have spiritual or ecclesiastical authority, they are basing that conclusion on 1 Tim 2:12. It may or may not be a valid conclusion (we will discuss that in our next paper), but it is exegetically incorrect to say that this is taught in Genesis 2, which makes no such limitation.

Hurley writes, “It is difficult to figure out how it could be said that the Law (i.e., the Old Testament) taught that women should be silent at all times in worship. It teaches the opposite (Ex. 15:20-21; 2 Sa. 6:15,19; Ps. 148:12). It is *not* difficult to see that the Old Testament would support the silence of women in the judging of prophets, as *its whole structure* teaches male headship in the home and in worship” (191-192). Hurley appeals to a generality because there is no particular verse that says what he wants it to say.

²³ Blomberg observes, “If ‘women’ is better interpreted as ‘wives,’ then these restrictions would not bar single women from the eldership, nor husbands and wives from positions of joint leadership, nor wives from offices of oversight in churches in which their husbands are not members” (286)—because none of those situations would involve wives ruling over their own husbands. He later suggests, “In Presbyterian or Episcopalian forms of church government, even senior pastors submit to larger structures of authorities over them, so presumably women’s subordination could be preserved even with a female senior pastor” (291).

²⁴ Craig Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Hendrickson, 1992), 23.

Corinth.²⁵

It is sometimes suggested that synagogues had separate seating for men and women, and that the early church continued this custom—hence when women asked questions of the men, it was necessary to shout across a barrier, and that is why Paul prohibited such questions in church. Although the hypothesis is attractive because it would provide a motive for Paul’s directives, there is little proof for gender-separated seating for first-century synagogues.²⁶

Weighing the prophecies

Several scholars have argued that Paul is saying that women should not be involved in the “weighing” of prophetic messages (v. 29)—only men may determine whether a message is in accordance with sound doctrine.²⁷ In this view,

²⁵ Blomberg writes, “If one of the cultural explanations for Paul’s silencing the women is accepted, then contemporary Christians will silence women only where comparable problems—lack of education, interfering chatter, or the promotion of false teaching—still exist. And they will impose silence on men who fall victim to one of these problems as well” (286).

²⁶ Keener, 76. Donald Binder writes, “Our only *clear* evidence for the division of the sexes in a synagogue comes from Philo’s writings about the practices of the Therapeutae.... We can only guess to what degree these customs reflected those held outside this specialized community” (*Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* [Society of Biblical Literature, 1999], 378-9). The Therapeutae were a religious sect and their practices were not necessarily representative of other synagogues.

²⁷ The view was suggested in 1965 by Margaret Thrall, professor at Cambridge, in a small commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians. It was defended in detail by three Cambridge students: James Hurley in a dissertation in 1973, Wayne Grudem in a dissertation in 1978, and by D.A. Carson (Ph.D., Cambridge, 1975) in a book in 1987.

Thomas Schreiner, another traditionalist scholar (Ph.D., Fuller, 1983), expresses reservations about this view (in a book review in *Trinity Journal* 17 [spring 1996]: 120). More recently, he notes that “the specific situation that called forth these words is difficult to identify” (in Beck and Blomberg, 231). Blomberg adopts Grudem’s view, but admits, “The obvious drawback of this approach is that it must infer a meaning for ‘speaking’ which Paul never spells out. But that problem afflicts all of the views that take Paul’s words as less than absolute” (ibid.).

Richard M. Davidson opts for his view, but restricts it to marital relations: “Paul’s call for the wives to ‘be silent’ (*sigāō*) was a particular silence while their husband’s prophecies were being tested, and did not indicate total silence in the worship service” (“Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture,” in *Women in Ministry* [ed. Nancy Vyhmeister; Andrews University Press, 1998], 277). Mary Evans suggests the same: “What is being prohibited is not the

men and women may prophesy, but only men may comment on the validity of the prophecies, because only men have that authority. This interpretation has the advantage of keeping vv. 34-35 on the same subject as the rest of the chapter: the orderly use of spiritual gifts.²⁸ In keeping with this view, they say that women may speak in church but (based largely on 1 Tim 2:12) may not have authority.

This interpretation has become almost unanimous among traditionalist scholars. They argue that prophecy (an unplanned comment) is not as authoritative as teaching (an explanation of Scripture); women can speak prophecies but should not have “ecclesiastical authority” in which they have the responsibility to teach or judge in an official way what men say.

Several points may be noted against this view:

1) When Paul says that “the others” should weigh what is said (v. 29), he may mean the entire congregation or the other prophets—either of which would have included females. Keener suggests that the “others” who weigh (*diakrinō*) the prophecies would be people with the gift of discernment (*diakrisis*) (12:10), but he notes that nothing suggests that only males are given this gift.²⁹

2) When Paul wrote that they should “weigh carefully what is said,” it is by no means clear that he is advocating a formal discussion and pronouncement by leaders of the church. Rather, his meaning might more simply be that each person should *think* about whether the saying is true, much as people today might during sermons.³⁰ Verses 34-35 are hardly an adequate explanation of “how to proceed

questioning of any man by any woman, but a wife taking part in the judging of her own husband” (*Woman in the Bible* [InterVarsity 1983], 99).

²⁸ “The discussion of women has a natural place and does not appear as a sudden intrusion or as a shift of topic” (Hurley, 190). Scholars who have a different view admit that the verses “seem to rudely interrupt the topic at hand” (Belleville, *Women Leaders*, 155). Keener refers to “the awkward way it fits its context,” and explains: “Paul frequently digressed, and digressions were a normal part of ancient writing” (*Paul, Women and Wives*, 74).

²⁹ Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives*, 79.

³⁰ Indeed, Grudem admits that v. 29 *implies* that the women should be “silently evaluating the prophecies in their own minds” (“Prophecy—Yes, But Teaching—No” (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 [1987]: 21). There is no indication in the text that the evaluation is ever done out loud. Paul said that only two or three tongues-speakers should speak, and only two or three prophets should speak; he would therefore not be likely to invite an unlimited number of men to comment verbally on the prophecies. He makes no regulations for prophecy-evaluators, which suggests that this was not a formal part of the worship service.

with ‘let the others weigh what is said.’”³¹

3) There is no evidence that “all the congregations of the saints” had any procedure for evaluating prophecies—or that this was done in *any* other church. None of the early interpreters suggested that vv. 34-35 are guidelines for evaluating prophecy.³²

4) Paul nowhere suggests that the weighing of prophecies, or discerning of spirits, is more authoritative than prophecy. Rather, throughout 1 Cor. 14 he extols prophecy as the most useful gift.

5) These scholars have reversed the natural meaning of v. 35, which suggests that the women want to *learn* something by asking questions. In contrast, these scholars say that the problem is that the women were expressing a judgment. It would be of dubious value for a woman with the gift of discernment to withhold her reservations about the message until she got home, where she would share her thoughts with her husband, who might not have the gift of discernment.³³

6) It seems that worship services in Corinth were chaotic; they probably did not have a time designated for evaluating prophetic messages, so it is doubtful that Paul is addressing problems that the Corinthians already had with this evaluation time—nor is there evidence that Paul is anticipating a hypothetical objection. Verses 34-35 indicate that the problem concerned comments and questions that the women were making, perhaps to everyone at once, or to specific men.³⁴

7) In the Grudem-Hurley view, it would not be insubordinate for a woman to ask questions or make comments about the prophecy given *by a woman*. But Paul

³¹ Grudem claims that vv. 33b-35 explain how to judge prophecies (Grudem, 234).

³² Most early interpreters emphasized the silence of women, without providing for exceptions. The common complementarian interpretation *and* the common egalitarian interpretation are both relatively modern; both recognize that the traditional approach ignored the context.

³³ “If Paul is here referring to the ‘weighing of prophecy’ he would be advising ‘the women’ to carry out that function at home. Such private judging of prophecy would be in contravention both of the method Paul has just prescribed (the other prophets are publicly to discern prophecies) and the function of true prophecy as a community edifier (14.4) and public witness (14.24)” (L. Ann Jervis, “1 Corinthians 14.34-35,” 61).

³⁴ Grudem suggests that “Paul anticipates an evasion of his teaching” (234), as if women might say, If we can’t evaluate the prophecies, can we at least ask questions? But throughout chapter 14, Paul seems to be addressing real situations, and there is no hint in v. 35 that he is switching to a hypothetical question. He does not anticipate “what if” questions about tongues-speaking, for example. If he simply wanted to silence women, v. 34 would have been sufficient.

does not address such a possibility.

8) Paul's call for women to be quiet comes five verses *after* he says that prophecies should be evaluated, and it uses a different verb. Paul does nothing to connect v. 34 with v. 29. Verses 34-35 may not be on the topic of spiritual gifts, but they *are* about order in the worship service, and it is not unreasonable for Paul to include these verses in this chapter, and then conclude his discussion of spiritual gifts in v. 36.

It is reasonable to suggest that Paul is prohibiting the same kind of speech that he prohibits for tongues-speakers and prophets: out-of-turn speaking. While someone has the podium, the others should be quiet, not making loud comments, not calling out questions (no matter how well intentioned³⁵), and not having their own conversations, for any of those would be disgraceful in the eyes of the public, contrary to what God wants, and contrary to the way that other congregations functioned.³⁶

Ben Witherington suggests the following possibility: "It is very believable that these women assumed that Christian prophets or prophetesses functioned much like the oracle at Delphi, who only prophesied in response to questions,

³⁵ Keener says, "Paul here actually opposes something more basic than women teaching in public...he opposes them learning too loudly in public" (*Paul, Women and Wives*, 80).

³⁶ Grudem says that if Paul is addressing a problem unique to Corinth, then it would be pointless to say that "women should remain silent *in the churches*" (245). But it makes perfectly good sense to say that people should not interrupt worship services, no matter what church we are talking about, no matter whether it is a problem in other churches.

Grudem also objects to the idea that Paul's main concern is order in the church: "Paul himself says that his concern is the principle of submission" (247). Paul mentions submission, yes, but he does not say that it is his primary concern. His concern throughout the chapter is on order, and it is not unreasonable to think that this might be his primary concern in vv. 34-35 as well. Carson, writing in a volume that Grudem helped edit, says: "Although the focus in the second part of the chapter is still on tongues and prophecy, it is still more closely related to the order the church must maintain in the enjoyment of those grace gifts" (152).

In vv. 34-35, Paul's concern is the behavior of women, and his reference to submission and the law is only one of his lines of support. As we saw in 1 Cor. 11, Paul could gather support from several lines of evidence (including Scripture) for head coverings, a custom based in culture. His primary concern in that passage was not a doctrine of headship, or of God's image, or of angels in worship services (although he mentions them), but his primary concern is women's appearance. We should not confuse a supporting argument with the primary purpose of the passage. In 1 Cor. 14, order is the primary concern; submission is a supporting argument.

including questions about purely personal matters. Paul argues that Christian prophecy is different: Prophets and prophetesses speak in response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, without any human priming of the pump. Paul then limits such questions to another location, namely home. He may imply that the husband or man who was to be asked was either a prophet or at least able to answer such questions at a more appropriate time.”³⁷

Noisy women

We believe that the “noisy meeting” theory makes sense of the biblical data: Women were disturbing the meeting in some way.³⁸ However, Hurley criticizes this view, and we will respond to his objections:

1) “There is no indication elsewhere in the letter that the women in particular were unruly.”³⁹ We believe that this objection is not valid. An analysis of chapter 11 shows that women were the primary problem; Paul gives fewer supporting arguments for the way that men should appear, suggesting that he believes there is a greater need to correct the way women pray and prophesy.

2) “Paul does confront unruly situations in the letter (11:33-34; 14:27,29,31). He meets them by establishing order rather than by silencing the unruly completely.” This is true, but it says nothing against the noisy meeting theory. No one believes that Paul silenced women completely.⁴⁰ The silence he commanded

³⁷ *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1995), 287. Similarly, Richard Longenecker writes, “Paul’s words here pertain to the topic of charismatic excess discussed in chapters 12-14, are meant to restrict certain aberrations which arose within the worship of the Corinthian church, and should not be turned into a general ecclesiological principle” (*New Testament Social Ethics for Today* [Eerdmans, 1984], 86).

³⁸ Paul does not provide enough information for us to be sure about the exact nature of the problem. It might involve rude comments, chatter, noisy questions, or ecstatic shouts (which characterized women in some Greek mystery religions). As Blomberg notes, “Egalitarians and hierarchicalists alike need to stop accusing each other of being unbiblical and instead acknowledge more humbly that the biblical data simply aren’t clear enough to permit dogmatism on either side” (292).

³⁹ Quotes from Hurley are from page 188 of his book.

⁴⁰ Grudem has a similar objection: “If women were being disruptive, Paul would just tell them to act in an orderly way, not to be completely silent. . . . If noise had been the problem in Corinth, he would have explicitly forbidden *disorderly* speech, not all speech” (245). But not even Grudem believes that Paul tells people to be “completely silent.” His objection can be turned on his own

for women was a temporary silence, just as it was for prophets and tongues-speakers; the goal of all these commands was an orderly worship service.

3) “The rule which Paul sets out is one which he says applies in all his churches (14:33b). It seems unlikely that the problem of noisy women had arisen in all of them.” However, Paul does not say that a *rule* had to be given in all the churches—it is enough that the churches were already doing what theology and culture said was proper. No matter how the problem is defined, it seems unlikely that the same problem had arisen in all the churches—if it had been that common, Paul would have given the Corinthians some guidance on it when he established the church in Corinth, and on this matter he does not allude to any prior teaching.⁴¹ Most churches were already orderly.⁴²

4) “It seems unlike Paul to silence all women because some are noisy or disruptive. His actual handling of other disorderly people provides concrete grounds for arguing against wholesale action when only some individuals are in fact violators.” This objection is groundless. Paul sometimes gives commands to an entire group even when it is unlikely that *every* member of the group had a problem:

In 1 Tim. 5:11, he writes as if *all* younger widows are unable to control their

view: If Paul meant judging prophecies, then he would have said *that*, rather than forbidding all speech. Actually, it is not fair for people to object to proposed interpretations by saying that the text doesn’t explicitly indicate that particular problem, because the text doesn’t pinpoint *any* particular problem. It is unavoidable that we have to guess what problem *best* accounts for Paul’s response.

⁴¹ “We may assume that the problem was specific to Corinth and perhaps a few other cities like it. After all, his other instructions in this chapter address specific abuses of the gifts at Corinth; had they obtained generally, we can be sure that Paul would have already given these regulations during his extended stay with them” (Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives*, 73). Verse 36 also implies that Paul is dealing with problems that are unique to Corinth.

⁴² Grudem has a similar objection: “His rule cannot be restricted to one local church where there supposedly were problems.... Paul directs the Corinthians to conform to a practice that was universal in the early church” (245). But Grudem’s objection applies to his own view, as well: There is no evidence that other churches were having problems with a prophecy-evaluation time in the worship service, nor evidence that most other churches had insubordinate women. Paul implies that a “rule” was not necessary in most churches; they were already doing what they were supposed to do. Everyone agrees that Paul is telling the Corinthians to conform to what other churches did; the question is whether the deviation at Corinth was disruption, or that women might be tempted to ask questions about the prophecies.

desires to be married; in Titus 1:12 he writes as if everyone on Crete is a lazy glutton. In 1 Tim. 2:8, he instructs *men* to pray “without anger or disputing.” Apparently the problem about prayer in Ephesus was caused only by men, and probably only by some of them, so Paul gave instructions only for the men; in the same way, the problem with talking in Corinth happened to be caused by women. Paul was writing to specific churches, dealing with specific situations, not trying to write manuals for all churches in all times. Paul sometimes wrote principles that are of universal validity, but other instructions are an application of timeless truth to a specific situation.

Even in Hurley’s interpretation, Paul was too sweeping in his prohibition—he forbids all questions because *some* of them might not be submissive. However, Paul’s command is quite reasonable if we understand Paul to be addressing a general commotion: People should not disrupt the service. Paul assumed that the Corinthians could figure out, just as we do today, that whispering is permissible, and that a woman can ask the pastor, not just her own husband. It is not disgraceful for women to pray and prophesy in church, but it is disgraceful for them (or anyone else) to cause a commotion, and that is Paul’s main concern.

Conclusion

Although we cannot answer all questions about the specific situation Paul was addressing in Corinth, we do conclude that he was addressing a specific situation rather than making a general prohibition on women speaking in church. His intent was to prohibit disruptive and disrespectful questions and comments that were part of the chaotic Corinthian meetings—and in Corinth, these particular practices were coming from the women. Just as he told the disorderly tongues-speakers and prophets to control themselves because God is not a God of disorder, he also told the women to control themselves because the law teaches self-control. If they want to learn something, they can ask questions somewhere else.⁴³

Only one person should speak at a time. Everyone else, whether male or female, should be quiet, for it is disgraceful for people in the audience to be talking

⁴³ Eugene Peterson gives this paraphrase in *The Message*: “Wives must not disrupt worship, talking when they should be listening, asking questions that could more appropriately be asked of their husbands at home. God’s Book of the law guides our manners and customs here. Wives have no license to use the time of worship for unwarranted speaking.”

while someone else is speaking to the group. Just as Paul's call for tongues-speakers or prophets to be silent should not be turned into a demand that they never say anything at all, so also his call for women to be quiet should not be turned into a demand that they never give messages of spiritual value in church. That is something that Paul specifically allows in chapter 11.