

PREFACE

I would like to begin by reading the extended context for our three-verse passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:29-36.

I propose two ways we can hold to a proper perspective on this passage. The first is to keep in mind the context.

- The overall context of the chapter: Spirit-gifts and Order in the Assembly, for the purpose of edification;
- The lead-in: The proper use of *prophecy* in the assembly, including (and importantly) the “judgment” or evaluation of what has been said (vv29-33a);
- The immediate context: “God is not a God of confusion, but of peace” (v33a).

Note: As I said before, I do not have a strong position on the two interpretations of v33 into v34; either can work. But it does seem that the interpretation of the ESV and NIV84 makes the most sense: “for God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women are to keep silent in the churches...”

As I have studied these two verses, I found myself repeatedly returning to that first part of v33 for guidance. The God we worship in the assembly does not respond well to confusion, nor is He its author; His Spirit at work in the assembly does not do His work by means of disorder, loud commotion, instability—chaos.

A second way we can hold to a proper perspective is to note that “women” (or wives) are not the only ones being told to be silent in the assembly. Look at v28, regarding tongues: “but if there is no interpreter, he [the man moved to speak in a tongue] **must keep silent** in the church.” Now look at vv29-30, regarding prophecy: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one **must keep silent.**” And then, in v34, the apostle commands a third category of person to “keep silent”: “The women **are to keep silent** in the churches.”

We have established the reasons for the first two, both of which have to do with good order in the assembly, and edification of the church. Now we will see that the reasons for the third are similar—but with an added element: the God-ordained relationship of wife to husband, specifically that the husband is the spiritual head of the wife (11:3).

We have seen in this study that many marriage relationships in the Corinth church were, to be kind, confused. In that church

- a man was living with his step-mother (5:1);
- some married couples were eschewing sexual relations with each other (7:3-5), considering themselves too “spiritual” for such things—yet, because they were believing the Greek philosophers who were telling them that (as spiritual beings) the physical body was nothing, so what the physical body *did* was nothing; hence,
- some men were visiting prostitutes (6:15).

This passage (along with being a treatise on the proper use of Spirit-gifts in the assembly) is also part of the apostle’s continuing effort to repair the husband-wife relationship.

v34

The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

Let us first set the scene: The church is meeting for worship and instruction in the home of one of its members. We can safely assume that the women would be seated together, either in a separate alcove or at least the other side of the same room as the men. While the home may have been a physically more comfortable venue, culturally it was an awkward setting that strained many of society’s rules for men and women. Philo of Alexandria was a Jewish writer in the first century, a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, who died shortly before this letter was written. He knew well the times and the culture of the Mediterranean world.

Philo: Market-places and council-halls and law-courts and gatherings and meetings where a large number of people are assembled, and open-air life with full scope for discussion and action—all these are suitable to men both in war and in peace. The women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house, within which the middle door is taken by the maidens as their boundary, and the outer door by those who have reached full womanhood. (quoted by Garland)

In many ways the Christian church represented a measure of *liberation* for women; in comparison to our own time we may consider it rather repressive, but in that culture it gave adult women opportunities they had never had before. In the church, women were praying and prophesying, in public and around men (11:5).

Let’s take the opportunity at this point to more closely examine that verse in Chapter Eleven—specifically, the background Scripture that supports it.

Read Joel 2:27-29.

Joel's prophecy is often cited as validation for women prophesying in the Christian church. But there is a problem with that: as his prophecy continues, it is clear that he is speaking eschatologically—describing the end times.

Read Joel 2:30-31.

Because of this, is it fair to use Joel 2:28-29 to back up what Paul writes in 11:5? Well, Peter did. In Acts 2 the apostles have just been filled with the Holy Spirit, resulting in them speaking in the tongues of “devout men from every nation under heaven” (2:5). Some witnessing this were impressed, but “others were mocking and saying, ‘They are full of sweet wine’” (2:12). Then Peter stood and, in his first sermon under the influence of the Holy Spirit, cited Joel's prophecy.

Read Acts 2:14-18.

Peter begins the quotation with “And it shall be in the last days...,” and continues to quote even the prophecy that speaks of end-time manifestations. Nevertheless he uses Joel to explain that the time for such things as speaking in foreign tongues and prophesying by *anyone* so empowered by the Spirit had arrived. It is outside the purview of this study, but it may be that Peter's position was that the coming of the Spirit did indeed inaugurate the eschaton (last things).

Nevertheless, in the first-century church this was to occur within the boundaries of decorum and order, the hierarchy of the church, and the order of priority, or “headship.” This is why in 11:5 the apostle writes, “But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head...” The woman so called upon by the Holy Spirit may speak, but she must have her head covered in the assembly.

We can add to this tension the possibility that because they were meeting in a home—a venue in which women typically enjoyed the greatest level of liberty—some women were forgetting the proprieties required during a meeting of the church.

Although all of our common translations translate the Greek *gynaikeis* “women” it seems obvious that the apostle is addressing *married* women in particular, for in the next verse he instructs them to “ask their own husbands at home,” and in this verse he says they “are to subject themselves”—implied, to their husbands (their “head”).

The women... are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

I realize that the difference between one word or another may be small, if not infinitesimal, but I favor the KJV here: “under obedience.” Not only is it the most literal (*hypotassesthai* = to place or arrange under, obey) but for me it emphasizes not just submission to the husband (“head”) but obedience to *his* head, Christ and God’s word (“Law”).

Every child of God is called to obey his or her Lord: Christ Jesus. Every child of God is called to take the written word of God seriously, and strive to make it and the life of Christ their highest pattern for a righteous life. Part of that for women is that they are not to question or take issue with what someone else has said in the corporate assembly. The immediate context for v34 is Paul’s instructions for how prophecy is to be managed *within that setting*. This does not mean that they are not permitted to ask their questions, to understand, to learn and benefit from the prophecy; it means that the proper venue for that is at home with their husband (v35)—and especially (in the first century) not call out to him from across the room in the middle of the service. One can easily see how that might cause “confusion” (v33), and would not lend itself to the service being conducted “properly and in an orderly manner” (v40).

Verse 29 reads, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.” With v34 Paul makes clear that by “others” he means other *men*. Even so, I believe we have made the case for a woman, moved by the Spirit and gifted by Him to prophesy, may indeed speak.

...just as the Law also says.

Scholars are not sure if Paul has a specific text from the OT in mind with this reference, since there is no passage that tells women, specifically, that “they are not permitted to speak” in the assembly. He may just be referring to the overall order of creation, which is sustained throughout God’s word, and no less in the Christian church.

A. T. Robertson: Certainly women are still in subjection (*hypotassesthan*) to their husbands (or ought to be). But somehow modern Christians have concluded that Paul’s commands on this subject, even 1Tim 2:12, were meant for specific conditions that do not apply wholly now. Women do most of the teaching in our Sunday schools today. It is not easy to draw the line. The daughters of Philip were prophetesses. It seems clear that we need to be patient with each other as we try to understand Paul’s real meaning here.

In our next session we will conclude our study of this passage.