

PREFACE

In our previous study we examined v34 of this challenging passage; in this session we will look at the details of the rest of the paragraph, vv35-36.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:33-36.

v33

Before we get into v35, let me offer a more detailed explanation for why I prefer the NIV84 and ESV (and CSB) for their transition from v33 to v34. Frankly I'm a bit flabbergasted that the reputable NASB and KJVs translate v33 as "for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." What does that really mean? Does any Christian church need to be reminded that God is who He is in all churches of the faith? Were any of them thinking, "Oh, I thought His ways were unique in *our church*." Now, if it said something like, *for God does not want confusion but peace in your church, as in all the churches of the saints*, that would make more sense. But v33 speaks of God's *character*, not His preferences.

It makes much more sense that Paul is saying, "As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches." In other words, *God has established for the church universal that women should keep silent in the local churches. You, Corinthians, need to do this as well.*

v35

Verse 35 contains a number of contextual pointers:

- "If they desire to learn anything" points to the women/wives having questions about what has been said in the assembly—specifically regarding prophecies;
- "let them ask their own husbands at home" points to Paul's assumption that all or at least most would be *married* women;
- "for it is improper for a woman to speak in church" points, again, to the husband/wife relationship, since the Greek word is better translated "shameful," or "disgraceful"—i.e., shaming or disgracing her "head."

If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home;

There is a time and place for everything. In our church the closest we get to "prophecy" on a Sunday morning is the pastor's sermon (though we certainly do not call it such). Would it be disruptive to the worship service if, during the sermon, a woman stood up and asked for clarification of something he had just said? Would it be disruptive if a man stood up and did the same? Yes to both. In our tradition, one does not do that—not just for decorum's sake, but for doing nothing that might hinder the word being preached.

In our church there *is* a time when that question—from either man or woman—would be perfectly acceptable: during the ABF hour (Adult Bible Fellowship) with the pastor that follows the worship service. The message of prophecy in any form is for *all* (v31), but there is a time and place for questions and discussion.

The question has been raised, What about non-wives, such as widows or single women? It would then be appropriate for those without husbands to privately seek out the pastor or an elder in the church, a teacher, or even an older, more-knowledgeable woman.

for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

We addressed this at length in our last session on v34 (“The women are to keep silent in the churches...”); now I would like to focus on the word benignly translated in the NASB “improper.” The “speaking” being referred to was and is indeed disorderly and lacking in decorum, but the Greek is saying far more than that.

The Greek word is *aischron*, which our other versions translate as either “shameful” or “disgraceful,” which are both closer to the idea behind the word. Paul has used this word before, in the passage in Chapter Eleven about a woman covering her head.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:5-6.

The root of this word in secular Greek meant something that is ugly, horrible, shameful, contemptible, even evil. The word sometimes includes a sexual or licentious connotation, as in the shameful act of displaying a portion of the human body that should remain private.

Of course, just as we learned in our study of Chapter Eleven, shame, or disgrace, is a moving target; it is localized by time and by region: what is considered shameful in one place or time, may not in another. Similar to the head covering for women, a woman speaking up in the assembly may not be considered literally disgraceful today.

We need to delineate between the two aspects of this situation being addressed by Paul. First, there is the aspect of bringing shame or disgrace to a woman’s spiritual head—her husband—by her behavior in the assembly. Second there is the aspect of decorum, disrupting by her behavior the holy purpose of the assembly: worship and edification. The first may or may not be true, based on time and place; the second is *always* true. (Which, come to think of it, makes the NASB “improper” not a bad choice to cover both aspects.)

Some interpreters conclude that the apostle in this passage refers to women idly chattering and gossiping to each other, and thus disrupting the assembly. But the fairer sex does not have the exclusive franchise on such things; men can do the same thing. No, the phrase “if they desire to learn anything” lifts this talk out of the realm of idle chatter, and fits very well into the context of their commenting on or posing questions about the prophesying that has just occurred.

We should keep in mind that this call for women to “keep silent in the churches” (v34) is a “temporary renunciation of speech. It refers to ‘holding one’s tongue’” (Garland) for the betterment of others. Let me illustrate this: In our church there is one member of one worship team that does something on-stage that I find distracting in the extreme, to the extent that when this individual is there, I am unable to concentrate on the words, and hence my worship is disrupted. I considered putting my hand up to my face as a blinder to block my vision of this individual, but realized that my doing this odd behavior could be just as disruptive for others in the congregation. So I am left to close my eyes, and if I do not know the lyrics to the song, I cannot sing. The point? *It is better for me to restrict what I would like to do, so as to not disrupt the worship of others in the assembly.*

This is what Paul is talking about when he three times limits the speech of individuals in the assembly. If we were to get inside the heads of those individuals, we might hear these thoughts:

- v28: *There is no one present to interpret my tongue, so for the sake of order, I will be silent, and reserve my Spirit-speech for when I am alone.*
- v30: *My prophecy seems important, but I can see that Joe over there is fit to burst. I’ll sit back down and hold my prophecy for later. His may be more important than mine.*
- v35: *I really don’t understand what has just been said, but my learning is not more important than the learning and edification of others—and I don’t want to embarrass my husband. I’ll wait until we get home and talk to Harry about it.*

Paul captured the philosophy behind this earlier in the letter, in the context of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-24.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:31-33.

And in his letter to the Philippians Paul states this even more directly:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.
(Philippians 2:3-4)

To summarize, in vv33b-35, the apostle gives one more command for the church to meet in a dignified, orderly, and respectful manner. He states that only the men in the congregation should evaluate prophecy, and that wives (along with women in general) should discuss such things at home with their husband, rather than interrupt the assembly with their comments or questions. This injunction sustains both orderly, meaningful worship and edification, and the God-ordained order of the home.

v36

Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?

Verse 36 forms an inclusio, of sorts, with 33b: “As in all the churches of the saints,” (“the women are to keep silent...”). We might paraphrase this, *Do you think you can just go your own way?* With these two rhetorical questions, Paul accuses the church of being so off the rails, it was as if they imagined they had exclusive rights of interpretation of God’s word—i.e., the gospel. Using obvious hyperbole (Did you actually write it? Or was it written just for you?), he attacks their “maverick practices” (Garland), especially permitting women to speak in the assembly.

And, again, there is nothing new under the sun. Many churches today are behaving the same way, conducting themselves openly, brazenly in opposition to God’s word. Heretofore solid evangelical congregations (even entire denominations) are not just placing women in positions of church and denominational leadership, but now homosexuals, lesbians, and even transsexuals; and openly conducting marriages between two men or two women. In fact, the rebellious behavior of some churches today make the church in Corinth look tame.

CONCLUSION

We have spent three sessions examining this challenging passage. We as individuals can draw a number of lessons from the text, but the key lessons the apostle Paul wants us to take to heart from vv26-36 are

1. Let all things be done for edification (v26b).
2. Do not imagine that what you have to say is more important than what your neighbor has to say (vv28, 30, 34-35).
3. The priority of “headship” should be observed at all times (v34b).
4. All things in the assembly must be done properly and in an orderly manner (throughout, but also v40).