



## ~Women and Silence in the Churches~

by Steve Atkerson

If you ever wish to see a gathering of Evangelifish gnash their teeth and rend their garments as in olden times, all you need do is stand before them and quote with enthusiasm the biblical text, “women should remain silent in the churches.” Correctly applying this passage is quite a challenge, in large part due to the explosive nature of the topic. Taken from 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35, the entire offending passage reads: “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.”

1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 must not be studied in isolation. Its proper interpretation will necessarily harmonize with the rest of Scripture. It has been suggested that the correct place to begin is not with this passage at all, but rather back in 1 Corinthians 11a (regulations concerning head coverings during prayer and prophecy). Indeed, the ideal starting point is the first chapter of Genesis. Accordingly, before reading this article on silence, it may be best to first read the NTRF articles “Sisters In Service” and “Women As Teachers & Prophets.” That said, what is the correct application of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35?

1. **The command is crystal clear.** This one paragraph states four different ways that women are not to address the church:
  - A. “women should remain silent in the churches”
  - B. “they are not allowed to speak”
  - C. “they should ask their husbands at home”
  - D. “it is a disgrace for a woman to speak in the church”

According to *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “women were not to speak in public worship (33b-36) . . . The command seems absolute: Women are not to do any public speaking in the church” (Vol 10, pp. 275-276).

B.B. Warfield wrote that “precisely what the apostle is doing is forbidding women to speak at all in the church . . . It would be impossible for the apostle to speak more directly or more emphatically than he has done here. He requires women to be silent at the church meetings; for that is what ‘in the churches’ means, there were no church buildings then” (“Women Speaking in the Church,” *The Presbyterian*, Oct. 30, 1919, pp. 8-9).

Gordon Fee, in his commentary on this passage, opined that “despite protests to the contrary, the ‘rule’ itself is expressed absolutely. That is, it is given without any form of qualification. Given the unqualified nature of the further prohibition that ‘the women’ are not permitted to speak, it is very difficult to interpret this as meaning anything else than all forms of speaking out in public . . . the plain sense of the sentence is an absolute prohibition of all speaking in the assembly” (p. 706-707).

2. **It applies to “all” churches.** That women were “silent” in all first century church meetings

everywhere (and not just Corinth) is evident from the way the paragraph begins, “As in all the churches of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches” (14:33b). W. Harold Mare pointed out that 14:33b “emphasizes the universality of the Christian community. All the churches are composed of saints (those set apart for God), and should be governed by the same principle of orderly conduct” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10, p. 276).

Warfield put it this way, “‘It is not permitted’ is an appeal to a general law, valid apart from Paul’s personal command, and looks back to the opening phrase – ‘as in all the churches of the saints.’ He is only requiring the Corinthian women to conform to the general law of the churches. And that is the meaning of the almost bitter words that he adds in verse 36, in which – reproaching them for the innovation of permitting women to speak in the churches – he reminds them that they are not the authors of the Gospel, nor are they its sole possessors: let them keep to the law that binds the whole body of churches and not be seeking some newfangled way of their own.”

The Greek tense behind “should remain silent” is a present imperative, which generally commands the continuation of an existing condition, thus “keep on remaining silent” (*Beginner’s Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, W.H. Davis, p. 168). This indicates that the women in Corinth, as well as all other churches, were already silent. This was not a new command; they were merely being confirmed in what they were already doing.

It should be remembered that Paul himself had founded the church in Corinth. He stayed with them about two years, teaching and making disciples. He orally, in person, had *already* instructed them about the proper roles for men and women within the church. They knew, before he ever penned his letter to them, exactly what he had taught about women addressing the gathered church.

The New Covenant brought new freedom and liberty not found in the Old Covenant. Rather than special dietary restrictions, now all food is clean. Rather than just Hebrews being God’s people, under the New Covenant all believers, Jew and Gentile alike, are God’s people. Rather than just male Levitical priests, now all believers, men and women, are priests. After his departure, the Corinthians had written Paul many questions (7:1) about their new liberties in Christ. Evidently, some in Corinth also questioned Paul’s previously given verbal instructions about the proper role of the sisters in a church meeting. The letter to the Corinthians is his response to their queries.

**3. “Women” are not always “brothers.”** In many contexts the word brothers can refer to both men and women. Other times, it refers only to believing men (as it clearly does in 1 Corinthians 7:29, 9:5). It is a fluid term. Some argue that in 1 Corinthians 14, “brothers” refers to both men and women. Is this the case? The readers, throughout 1 Corinthians 14, are addressed as either “brothers” or “you” (second person pronoun). However, there is a significant pronoun shift from “you” to “they” (third person pronoun) in the paragraph concerning women (14:33b-35). Rather than writing, “women . . . you”, the text states, “women . . . they.” Why did Paul not write directly to the sisters, if they were included in the term brothers?

This pronoun shift can be easily accounted for if the word brothers throughout 1 Corinthians 14 refers primarily to the men. The women were thus referred to in third person, since they are written about, rather than directly addressed. When it is stated that all, anyone, or each one of the “brothers” can participate in the interactive meeting (14:26), it may specifically be men who are meant. Women (“they”) are not to make comments designed for the whole church to hear. Interestingly, the *textus receptus* adds the word “your” before “women” in 14:34, further evidence that the term brothers throughout 1 Corinthians 14 specifically referred to the men and not the women.

Since Paul had no hesitation about addressing women directly in other of his letters (for instance Euodia and Syntyche in Php 4:2), the fact that he did not here makes the case above all the more compelling. Again quoting Fee, “all the previous directions given by the apostle, including the inclusive ‘each one’ of v. 26 and the ‘all’ of v. 31, were not to be understood as including women.” (*New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle To The Corinthians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing p. 706).

For the sake of argument, suppose that the sisters were indeed included in the word brothers. It would parallel the case of a man gifted with tongues. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, every one of the brothers is said to be able to contribute a tongue. Reading this, the tongue-speaking man would anticipate the free exercise of his gift. Yet, in 14:28, the tongue speaker is informed that if no interpreter is present, he must keep silent and not speak in tongues. The chapter is still written to him, for he is a true brother, and the truth of participatory meetings still applies, but his contribution to the meeting would be limited. The same holds true for the prophets (if a revelation comes to another, the first prophet should stop). Would God give a prophet a prophecy that the prophet was not free to deliver? Evidently so, based on the inspired text (“the first speaker should stop” and “the spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets”). Finally, the same would hold true for the women also, even if they are counted among the brothers, who then learn in 14:33b-35 that they are not to speak to the church at all.

**4. “Silent” really does mean silent.** The word behind “silent” is *sigao*, defined in BAGD’s lexicon as “be silent, keep still, say nothing.” There exists a much less harsh term, *hesuchia*, which primarily means “quiet” in the sense of tranquil (used in 2Th 3:12 & 1Ti 2:11-12). However, *hesuchia* is not used here. The women were to be silent (*sigao*) with respect to speaking during the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting.

This same word, *sigao*, is used throughout 1 Corinthians 14. Those who speak in tongues are to be silent (*sigao*) when no interpreter is present (14:28). They are not to address the church at all with respect to delivering a tongue. Anyone who speaks prophecies is to be silent (*sigao*) if another person receives a revelation (14:30). He is not to prophesy any longer. Similarly, all the women are to be silent (*sigao*) in the assembly. They are not supposed to address the church.

**5. The silence is limited to speaking.** As pointed out above, the same Greek word translated “silent” (*sigao*) in 14:34 is also used with reference to the tongues speakers (14:28) and prophets (14:30). Each time *sigao* is used in 1 Corinthians 14, it is carefully qualified (limited in scope). So too with the women’s silence: it is qualified by the word “speak.” The Holy Spirit easily could have added, “they are not permitted to speak in judgment of prophecies,” or “they are not permitted to speak a teaching.” Instead He said, “they are not permitted to speak.” Thus, women are to remain silent with respect to speaking to the assembled church. The context is clear about what is being regulated: situations where only one person is up addressing the whole church (“one at a time,” 14:27 & “in turn,” 14:31). The silence requirement would therefore not apply to congregational singing, whispered comments not intended for the whole church, laughing, playing an instrument, chatting during the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper, etc.

**6. “Speak” refers to public statements.** From *laleo*, “speak” is used throughout 1 Corinthians 14 primarily with reference to those who would speak (*laleo*) publicly to the assembled church (with a teaching, an interpretation, etc.). In fact, the solution for a would-be public tongue speaker (with no interpreter present) is for him to instead *laleo* privately to himself and to God (14:28). Such private *laleo* is encouraged, not condemned. Thus the regulations throughout 1 Corinthians 14 primarily concern instances of public *laleo*, not private *laleo*. Similarly, Paul is not here prohibiting private *laleo*.

(conversation) between two women in 14:33b-35, but rather public *laleo*. Thus in this context, *laleo* (14:34) does not likely refer primarily to idle, thoughtless private babble nor to inconsiderate and distracting private chatting (though such would also be inappropriate). Instead, that which is being prohibited is public speaking intended for the whole church to hear.

Dr. Mare commented that “some have explained the apostle’s use of the word “speaking” (v.34) as connoting only general speaking and not forbidding a public address. But this is incompatible with Paul’s other uses of “speaking” in the chapter (vv.5, 6, 9, et al.), which imply public utterances as in prophesying (v.5)” (p. 276).

Warfield noted that: “It requires to be said at once that there is no problem with reference to the relations of *laleo* and *lego*. Apart from niceties of merely philological interest, these words stand related to one another just as the English words speak and say do; that is to say, *laleo* expresses the act of talking, while *lego* refers to what is said. Wherever then the fact of speaking, without reference to the content of what is said, is to be indicated, *laleo* is used, and must be used. There is nothing disparaging in the intimation of the word, any more than there is in our word talk; although, of course, it can on occasion be used disparagingly as our word talk can also – as when some of the newspapers intimate that the Senate is given over to mere talk. This disparaging application of *laleo*, however, never occurs in the New Testament, although the word is used very frequently.

The word is in its right place in 1 Corinthians 14:33ff, therefore, and necessarily bears there its simple and natural meaning. If we needed anything to fix its meaning, however, it would be supplied by its frequent use in the preceding part of the chapter, where it refers not only to speaking with tongues (which was divine manifestation and unintelligible only because of the limitations of the hearers), but also to the prophetic speech, which is directly declared to be to edification and exhortation and comforting (verses 3-6). It would be supplied more pungently, however, by its contrasting term here – ‘let them be silent’ (verse 34). Here we have *laleo* directly defined for us: ‘Let the women keep silent, for it is not permitted to them to speak.’ Keep silent – speak: these are the two opposites; and the one defines the other.”

**7. Silence is an act of submission.** “They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission” (14:34). For a woman to teach, judge a prophecy or dispute with a teacher would clearly not be speaking from a position of submission. Indeed, such is expressly prohibited in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. However, the inspired text goes even further in 1 Corinthians 14, and associates any public speaking by a woman in a church meeting as a non submissive activity. Head coverings, in 1 Corinthians 11a, are said to be a mere “sign” of submission to authority. Silence, in 1 Corinthians 14, is said to be an act of submission.

**8. Submission, not silence, is an Old Testament principle.** An appeal is made for the women to be submissive “as the Law says” (14:34). The word “Law” can refer specifically to Mosaic legislation. It can also refer to the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is so used here. The silence of women is not what the Law teaches. However, as is clear from the tenor of the Hebrew Scriptures, starting with creation, women are to be submissive to their husbands. Men were the leaders in both Hebrew society and religion (e.g., only men could be priests, the vast majority of the prophets were male, all the writing prophets were men, in the few historical examples where women did prophesy to men they did so in a more private setting, most of the political leaders were men, families were patriarchal, vows made by a wife could be revoked by her husband, Deborah rebuked Barak for wanting a woman to help him lead, etc.). Thus, the submission of the women, as expressed in 1 Corinthians 14 by their silence, is consistent with God’s truth revealed throughout the Old Testament.

**9. Even inquiries are prohibited.** Asking a question is the opposite of making a statement, yet even this is declared to be out of order in 14:35. Instead, women should “ask their own husbands at home.” Why? Because “it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (14:35). If Paul, under the inspiration of

the Holy Spirit, declares a certain activity to be “disgraceful,” then it is as if Christ Himself were declaring it to be disgraceful. Ultimately, how do we know what pleases our Lord unless He tells us? In God’s household, it is disgraceful for a woman to speak to the gathering of the church.

During the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, both men and women may have prophesied and supernaturally spoke in other languages. This resulted in a great number of conversions as people heard the gospel in their own language. Women may evidently pray in prayer meetings and speak or prophesy at evangelistic events. However, during the regular, weekly, Lord’s Day meetings of the whole church they are not to speak out publicly.

**10. “Disgrace” (14:35) does not mean “obscene.”** In an apparent effort to make a face value reading of the command for silence to appear improbable, some have suggested that the proper translation here should be “obscene.” They then cry, “Our sister’s voices are not obscene!” The simple fact is that the Greek underlying “disgrace” (1 Corinthians 14: 35) does not mean “obscene.” “Obscene” is too strong a word. “Disgrace” is from *aischros* (#150), defined by the lexicon as “shame, ugly, base.” *Aischros* is used other places in the Bible with reference to dishonest gain (Tit 1:11), of women with short hair and of men with long hair (1 Corinthians 11:6). I could not find a lexicon that suggested it fundamentally means “obscene.” In essence, those who say such erect and knock over a straw man in an attempt to make this biblical command seem ridiculous and not possibly of apostolic origin.

**11. 1 Corinthians 14 (women may not speak) does not contradict 1 Corinthians 11a (woman may pray & prophesy).** 1 Corinthians 11a implies that women are legitimately able to pray and prophesy. An important question concerns where that prayer and prophecy is to occur. May it be expressed in the gathering of the whole church on the Lord’s Day? Those who understand the prayer and prophecy by women in 1 Corinthians 11a to have occurred in a church meeting obviously are forced to reject a face value requirement of women’s silence in 1 Corinthians 14. On the other hand, if the prayer and prophecy of 1 Corinthians 11a occurred informally, apart from a 1 Corinthians 14 church meeting, then a face value application of 1 Corinthians 14 would become a more legitimate option. The evidence for the setting of 1 Corinthians 11a will be considered below. (However, whatever the setting of 1 Corinthians 11a, it should be clearly observed that God was pleased to gift certain women with the gift of prophecy, Joel 2:28ff, Ac 2. Further, it is a fair statement that our sisters’ prayers are as important to God as are any brother’s.)

**A.** It is a simple fact that nothing in 1 Corinthians 11a (prayer and prophecy) specifically states that the setting is a church meeting. To conclude such is a mere assumption. In contrast, 1 Corinthians 14 clearly does refer to a church meeting and teaches the silence of women. Letting the clear interpret the unclear, the logical conclusion is to understand the prayer and prophecy of 1 Corinthians 11a to occur informally, outside the meeting, at a time when women can speak.

Harvey Bluedorn has well written, “An obscure passage of Scripture is one which does not directly teach on a particular subject with one clear meaning. It is a very fallacious and unsound hermeneutical method to simply choose – on one’s own authority, from among the many possible interpretations of an obscure passage – to simply choose one particular interpretation, to anoint it as the true doctrine, and to use this chosen interpretation to invalidate a contrary teaching found in other clear passages which explicitly teach on the subject. The clear sheds light upon the obscure, not the other way around. To put the obscure passage in control is to stand all methods of understanding on their head. This is a classic method for twisting Scripture (2Pe 3:16).”

According to W. Harold Mare, “in chapter 11 Paul does not say that women were doing these things in public worship as discussed in chapter 14” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol 10, p277).



Regarding the harmonization of both 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 with 1 Corinthians 11a, Warfield observed, “In the face of these two absolutely plain and emphatic passages, what is said in 1 Corinthians 11:5 cannot be appealed to in mitigation or modification. Precisely what is meant in 1 Corinthians 11:5, nobody quite knows. What is said there is that every woman praying or prophesying unveiled dishonors her head. It seems fair to infer that if she prays or prophesies veiled she does not dishonor her head. And it seems fair still further to infer that she may properly pray or prophesy if only she does it veiled. We are piling up a chain of inferences. And they have not carried us very far. We cannot infer that it would be proper for her to pray or prophesy in church if only she were veiled. There is nothing said about church in the passage or in the context.” (*The Presbyterian*, Oct. 30, 1919, pp. 8, 9).

**B.** The greater context leading up to 1 Corinthians 11a concerns the eating of food at private dinner engagements, not church meetings.

**1.** This private setting runs all the way back to 1 Corinthians 8 (food sacrificed to idols). The desired application is, “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (11:9).

**2.** 1 Corinthians 9 (the right of an apostle to full time support) is written as an example of the extent to which Paul was willing to go to not to be a stumbling block. Thus, “we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (9:12B) and “I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible” (9:19) and “I do all this for the sake of the gospel” (9:23).

**3.** Accordingly, 1 Corinthians 10 goes back to the main subject of meat sacrificed to idols (and not presenting a stumbling block). Paul begins with a warning from Israel’s history, “these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (10:14). Next, to buttress his argument, he appeals to the Lord’s Supper, “flee from idolatry . . . You cannot have a part in the both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons” (10:16, 21). Then, in conclusion of the sacrificial meat issue, he appeals, “whatever you eat or drink or what you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble . . .” (10:31-32).

**4.** Thus, there is no evidence that Paul just suddenly and without introduction began writing about church meetings in 1 Corinthians 11a. Therefore, 1 Corinthians 11a is likely also dealing with activities that would occur in a private setting, apart from the assembled church, as when Deborah went to Barak with a personal word from the Lord (Jdg 4), or Huldah had a private audience with the King’s representatives (2Ki 22). Since 99% of anyone’s prayer life occurs outside of a church meeting anyhow, this makes perfect sense.

**C.** The actual instructions for church meetings apparently do not begin until 1 Corinthians 11:17, “In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church . . .” Such statements imply that the previous information was about prayer and prophecy uttered apart from a church meeting.

**D.** It is a fact that Paul had been in Corinth before writing this letter to them. Indeed, he founded the church there. Paul had already taught the church, in person, about women’s silence. Thus, before they ever read Paul’s letter, the Corinthians were aware of Paul’s beliefs regarding women speaking in church. Since the women were already silent, per Paul’s previous verbal instructions, then when 1 Corinthians 11a (about prayer and prophecy) was read, the readers would have automatically understood that Paul had in view occurrences of informal prayer and prophecy, not 1 Corinthians 14 church meetings.

**E.** The use of the word “churches” in 11:16 does not necessarily refer to church meetings per se, but rather to the totality of Christians living in various geographic locations. The idea is that just as none of the “churches” would have condoned adultery (a sin that obviously would not occur in the actual assembly), neither did the churches have any other practice regarding head coverings. Says Warfield,

“The word ‘church’ does not occur until the 16th verse, and then not as ruling the reference of the passage, but only as supplying support for the injunction of the passage. There is no reason whatever for believing that ‘praying and prophesying’ in church is meant” (*The Presbyterian*, Oct. 30, 1919, pp. 8, 9).

F. One of the reasons given for head coverings is simply, “because of the angels” (11:10). Angels can be present at church meetings, but they can also tune in to private gatherings where prayer and prophecy occur. Much more prophetic and prayerful activity goes on during the week than during the few hours of a Sunday church meeting. And, if the intended head covering is long hair (11:15), a woman would be covered twenty-four hours per day, seven days a week, precisely those times when she would pray and prophesy the most.

G. According to Gordon Fee, “it was traditional for exegetes, especially in some Protestant traditions, to argue that women did not really pray and prophesy, but that Paul’s language had to do only with their being present in divine services when prayer and prophecy were going on, or to their private praying” (*New International Commentary on First Corinthians*, p. 497, footnote #22). For instance, Harvey Bluedorn reasons thusly:

“For the sake of reasoning this matter out, we will suppose for the moment that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 does indeed discuss what to do in the gathered assembly.

The question before us now is, “Does this particular passage actually teach that women do pray or prophesy?” Read the passage carefully. It says:

If men pray or prophesy while covered, then they dishonor Christ – their Head. (11:3, 4)

If women pray or prophesy while uncovered, then they dishonor their husband – their head. (11:3, 5)

Where does it say women can pray or prophesy while covered? It simply does not! This is only an assumption which some persons, because of their presuppositions, infuse into the text. It is not a necessary inference from the text itself. There is no way by exegesis or by logic to prove the proposition.

One could just as easily argue that, in the gathered assembly, if women would pray and prophesy while uncovered, then they would dishonor their husband, but if women would pray or prophesy while covered, then they would dishonor Christ in the same way which the men would dishonor Christ if they would pray or prophesy while covered. The logic goes like this:

- If anyone prays or prophesies in the gathered assembly while covered, then that person dishonors Christ.
  - If a woman prays or prophesies in the gathered assembly while uncovered, then she dishonors her husband.
  - Therefore, if a woman prays or prophesies in the gathered assembly, then she dishonors either Christ (covered) or her husband (uncovered).

Or, to translate this back into the logic of the original passage:

- All uncovered persons are permitted to pray and to prophesy in the gathered assembly.
- We know (from elsewhere) that a woman cannot pray or prophesy in the gathered assembly.
- Therefore a woman must be covered (which happens to be the point of the passage).

Why must a woman be covered? Because to be uncovered is to be permitted to pray or to prophesy, but it

is shameful for a woman to be permitted to pray or to prophesy in the gathered assembly (1 Corinthians 14:35). Only men can be uncovered in the gathered assembly without shaming or dishonoring anyone. Therefore only men can pray and prophesy in the gathered assembly.

The only reason anyone would be uncovered in the gathered assembly would be to pray or to prophesy. Since a woman cannot be uncovered in the gathered assembly without cutting her hair (or, if you prefer, without removing a cloth veil from over her head), she therefore cannot pray or prophesy in the gathered assembly without being put to shame while dishonoring her husband.

We are not saying that this is the only possible explanation for 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. We are only saying that this is one possible explanation which cannot be disproved. Therefore we cannot assume that this passage necessarily permits women to pray and to prophesy, and we certainly cannot use this passage to invalidate a contrary teaching found in other clear passages which explicitly teach on the subject, namely, 1 Corinthians 14:33-37 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.”

**12. No long explanation was needed.** Hellenistic culture just happened to be consistent with God’s order at this point. First, in Jewish synagogues women were not allowed to speak publicly, and many of the early believers came from such a background. Second, 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 (Fritz Reinecker, *Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament*, 438). Third, throughout the pagan world, women were (quite wrongly) generally regarded as inferior to men (Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 774). Fourth, it is a fact that women were not allowed to speak at all in the gatherings of the secular Greek city-state ekklesia (Piper and Gruden, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 153). This accounts for why no lengthy explanations were necessary to support these instructions. And as has been previously observed, the women were already silent in the church meetings. This was not a new practice.

Given this historical context, if Paul had actually intended for women to be allowed to speak in church, he probably would have had to write extensively to convince his readers of such an abnormal practice. However, no such argument can be found in the New Testament. 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, upon the general tenor of the Hebrew Scriptures (the “Law,” v 34), and upon the “Lord’s command” (14:37). Contrary to his culture, Paul certainly did assert the equality of the sexes (Ga 3:28), but he still maintained the God-ordained subordination of wives to their husbands (1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 14, Ep 5:22ff, Col 3:18, 1 Ti 2:11-13). This family order is to be upheld with the realm of the church meeting also. It is a matter of function and order, not equality.

**13. 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 is not a quotation.** Some have understood 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 to be something that really belongs in quotation marks. The paragraph on women’s silence is treated as if it were a quotation from a letter the Corinthians had previously written to Paul (1 Corinthians 7:1), with 14:36-38 constituting Paul’s shocked response to their absurd idea. This quotation scenario is unlikely for several reasons:

- A. Such an approach is, to say the least, highly subjective and speculative.
- B. It would be different from Paul’s other quotations throughout 1 Corinthians, which were very short (this one would be long).
- C. Paul does not necessarily disagree with the actual quotations he does cite, but merely qualifies them. Here, he supposedly would be completely refuting it.
- D. Recently some have published their belief that a “Greek symbol”, *ayta*, found in 14:35, is the equivalent to the English quotation mark sign, thus proving 1 Corinthians 14:33-34 to be not Paul’s own



words, but merely a quotation. Can this be so?

1. First, the *ayta* is not at all a “Greek symbol,” but rather the seventh letter in the Greek alphabet. It is also a common one letter word (Strong’s #2228) that is usually translated “or” (as in 14:5, 6, 7, 19, 23, 27, & 29).

2. If it is true that the way to flag a quotation mark is with the *ayta*, then why does every major English translation (NIV, NAS, KJV, RSV, etc.) fail to treat 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 as a quotation?

3. Some actual quotations that do appear in 1 Corinthians are found in 1:12, 1:19, 1:31, 2:9, 2:16, 3:4, 3:19, 3:20, 4:6, 5:13, 6:12, 6:13, 6:16, 10:7, 10:23, 10:26, 10:28, 11:24, 11:25, 12:3, 12:15, 12:16, 14:21, 15:27, 15:32, 15:35, 15:45, 15:54, and 15:55. Does the *ayta* appear immediately after any of these quotations, as we should expect? It does not. This is because there is no such grammatical rule about an *ayta* marking quoted material.

4. The *ayta* is found repeatedly throughout 1 Corinthians, and in no case is it used to indicate a quotation. Arguably, *ayta* is used in 6:16 & 6:19 in a manner very similar to 1 Corinthians 14:36. In such cases, the *ayta*’s function is as a “disjunctive particle.” In short, this particular construction is a form of logical argument that is actually used to reinforce (not contradict) the preceding clause. The words that follow the disjunctive particle are used to enforce whatever statement precedes the disjunctive particle. In fact, it is sometimes employed when the audience is tempted to deny or reject the first statement. Other examples include 1 Corinthians 9:5-6, and 1 Corinthians 10:21-22 (Piper & Gruden, p. 149-150).

5. It has been suggested that this supposed quotation comes from Jewish writings, such as the *Talmud*, which the Corinthian church was supposedly following. First, the church at Corinth was primarily Gentile. What interest would a Gentile church have in an uninspired document produced by Jewish unbelievers who were hostile to Christianity? Second, exactly where in the *Talmud* is this alleged quotation found? Chapter and verse, please! Third, the *Talmud* was **not even written** until A.D. 200! Finally, it is passing strange that no one, in the two thousand year history of the church, under the Spirit’s guidance, was smart enough or spiritual enough to have realized before now that 1 Corinthians 14:33-14 is actually an uninspired quotation.

**14. 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 is in every known Greek MSS.** Gordon Fee has suggested that 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 is a gloss (addition) that should not be in the Bible at all. He suspects it was added later, by some overzealous (and chauvinistic?) scribe. Such additions are certainly possible, but what is the evidence indicating this has occurred? A gloss is usually detected when some Greek manuscripts omit what others include. This is not the case at all with 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35. The paragraph on women’s silence is moved to the end of 1 Corinthians 14 in a few mss (it seems to fit better there), but it is nevertheless present and accounted for in every known Greek MSS (*The Greek New Testament*, UBS, 1975, p 611).

**15. Silence is the Lord’s command.** 1 Corinthians 14 is not “just” Paul’s opinion, but rather it is the “Lord’s command” (14:37). Despite the fact that silence is consistent with first century culture, this is not a cultural consideration. Paul was an apostle, a writer of scripture, outlining what he received from Jesus Himself as a direct command. It is not up for revision any more than any other biblical command.

To say that this isn’t binding on believers today is no different from saying that the New Testament commands concerning holiness aren’t binding. Jesus said, “whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves Me” (Jn 14:21). All who love the Lord will take seriously the things He commands and seek to obey them to the best of their understanding.

**16. The early church Fathers held to silence.** Jonathan Lindvall, president of Bold Christian Living, comments, “consider how the early church interpreted this. They were certainly more familiar with the cultural setting and the linguistic nuances of Paul’s letters. Yet they understood that women were not to speak publicly.” Not only the early church, but also the vast majority of believers throughout the past two

thousand years has understood 1 Corinthians 14:33-34 in this way.

Some are of the conviction that the early church fathers held to silence based on their hideous and erroneous views of the inferiority of women. Others go further and accuse the church of history of telling “lies” to women and of creating an oppressive situation that actually brought about the modern feminist movement. Regardless of whether the Fathers were wretched examples of proper New Testament church practice or absolutely faithful reflections of it, Martin Luther pointed out that our conscience must ultimately be bound by Scripture, and Scripture alone. The real issue is, “What saith the Word of the Lord?”

One must be careful in this debate to not lose sight of a more fundamental issue. Many brothers who apply 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34 in ways other than I do still hold to a divinely created gender distinction. They still uphold the value of masculinity and femininity. They reject the position that homogenizes men and women and transforms them into bland, sexless “persons.” They appreciate role differences in the marriage and the church. They believe the Scripture teaches these role distinctions. The issue upon which we disagree is the application of the Scripture to these role distinctions.

Many limit the required silence of the women to the judgment of prophecy. Specifically, 1 Corinthians 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 commanded that two or three prophets should speak. In 14:29b, Paul ordered that the prophecies be carefully judged. He regulated how prophecy was delivered in 14:30-33a. Finally, he regulated the judgment of the prophecy 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). 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 (see 1 Ti 2:11-13 and Paul’s allusion to “the law” in 1 Corinthians 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 husbands at home, after the meeting, as to why certain prophecies went unchallenged (14:35).

While I find the above explanations to be somewhat convoluted, I nevertheless respect those who hold to it. Many honorable men, trying to deal honestly with this text, hold to it. However, it is noteworthy that from the early church fathers forward, the church has generally held to the silence of women in church.

This “judging prophecies” interpretation seems to have originated only in the latter part of the 20th century.

### Frequently Asked Questions

**Why would God gift some women with the ability to prophesy if He did not want them to use the gift in the 1 Corinthians 14 church meeting?** To do this is not inconsistent with God’s economy.

According to 1 Corinthians 14, God sometimes gave some prophets a prophecy that was not to be delivered at the time of revelation (“And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop”, 14:30). The same held true for tongues speakers: the fourth man with a tongue was not allowed to speak it (14:27), even though it was from God! (The same was true for even the first tongues-speaker if no interpreter was present). This principle of the holding back of divine gifts is also

true for the women. Though capable of prophecy, there were to be silent in this particular setting. Further, there are many venues apart from the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting when a woman prophet could enjoy the free exercise of her gift (private gatherings, evangelism, etc.).

**In 1 Corinthians 14:35, what if the woman is not married or has an unbelieving husband?** First, it must be noted that there is no Greek word for “husband.” “Husband” (in 1 Corinthians 14:35) translates andras, and fundamentally just means “man.” Here it most probably does refer to a woman’s husband. However, it could also refer to whatever man was in her life (brother, father, husband, uncle, or an elder). Either way, married or not, a woman is to remain silent in 1 Corinthians 14 gatherings.

Women in general are not called upon to submit to men in general. (Indeed, no man in the church has authority over any over man or woman). Instead, women are asked to be submissive to their own husbands. On the other hand, women are not to take on leadership roles reserved for men in general: teaching the church, serving as elder, judging prophecy, contending with a teacher, etc. Here, in 1 Corinthians 14, the right to address the plenary assembly of the church seems to be categorized as an activity that is associated with male leadership, the opposite of submission.

**Paul encourages the Hebrews not to forsake their assembling together, but to encourage one another all the more, and to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. This “one-anothering” is not gender-specific. Do you believe Paul meant for this to happen outside of the meetings?** The main time for this to occur is, of course, the weekly Lord’s Day church meeting. Remember that the 1 Corinthians 14 time (when only one person at a time may speak to the whole church and when women are to be silent) is just one phase of the gathering. The other phase is the Lord’s Supper, a time of tremendous one on one interaction and fellowship, with a party atmosphere, when women could speak freely to anyone they please. The objective of both aspects of the meeting is edification. Edification is achieved during the Supper through fellowship; it is a beehive of talking and one-anothering. Edification is achieved through the 1 Corinthians 14 time through the exercise of the more public ministry gifts (teaching, prophecy, tongues, singing, etc.).

**What is the practical difference (from a female perspective) between a house church where the women may not speak in the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting and a traditional church in a building, since for her neither would be participatory?**

- 1.) She can still have input into the meeting through her husband.
- 2.) Her marriage will be strengthened as her husband learns to be a leader and expresses his thoughts by participating in the meeting himself. The women are to practice a dynamic silence that encourages the men to speak. One brother cautioned, “a real concern is that house churches will become a haven for lead-taking women, and that once again the God-given authority of the men will be subverted; this time not by the pastor, but by unquiet women. The open, Spirit-led meeting is only half of the matter. We cannot be careful to take 1 Corinthians 14: 26-33a at face value, and then treat 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 with altogether different sensibilities. The unquietness of the women, both in church and out, is only a reflection of the church as the bride of Christ, and that we are not subject to our Husband in everything.”
- 3.) Holding her questions until she can ask her husband at home also serves to encourage her husband to be the spiritual leader in his home. What a wise course God counsels, and He accomplishes so much with one simple order. If only our obedience were as great as His wisdom!

**How can things be so regimented that the women are not allowed to make even a single little comment in the informal living room atmosphere of a house church meeting?** Such a question ascribes too insignificant and informal a nature to the meetings of the house church. First, when we come together as a church, we are “assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus” and in such meetings it is possible

that the “power of our Lord Jesus is present” (1Co 5:4). In fact, special care should be taken “so that when you meet together, it may not result in judgment” (1Co 11:34). James warned that not many brothers should presume to be teachers because “we who teach will be judged more strictly” (Jam 3:2). Church meetings are so important that the Scriptural guidelines for them are referred to as “the Lord’s command” (1Co 14:37). Peter wrote in general that, “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1Pe 4:11). How much more should this apply to speaking to God’s assembled people? Just as the Lord’s Supper is no ordinary dinner, but rather a sacred, covenant meal, so too the meetings of the home church are not just informal chitchats over coffee, but rather holy assemblies in the name of the Lord Jesus with Him present in power.

**How would the silence requirement of 1 Corinthians 14 apply to the Lord’s Supper portion of a church meeting (1Co 11:17ff)?** There were two phases to every New Testament Lord’s Day church meeting: the Lord’s Supper phase and the Interactive Meeting phase. Both result in the edification of the church, but there are differing rules for each phase.

1. During the Lord’s Supper, no one person typically addresses the entire church. This is because the Supper is a full meal, a time of fellowship and informal one-on-one interaction. It is to have the atmosphere of a wedding banquet. No songs are typically sung (it is difficult to sing with a mouth full of food). As it is a fellowship meal, no one would teach during the Supper (listening to a message would necessarily squelch conversation). Though all partake of a common cup and loaf, church members may not actually eat the meal in the same room (some may be in the dining room, some in the kitchen, some in the den, and still others on the front porch outside the home).
2. 1 Corinthians 14, on the other hand, deals with rules regulating times when it is appropriate to address the entire church in plenary (full) session. Everyone is necessarily in the same room. Only one person at a time is to be allowed to speak. In the early church, the 1 Corinthians 14 phase followed the Lord’s Supper phase (1 Corinthians 11b). Thus, the silence requirement of 1 Corinthians 14 would not apply at all to the Lord’s Supper portion of a church meeting.

**If the women are not permitted to speak at all during the 1 Corinthians 14 style of meeting, then when would they have the opportunity to express their praises, testimonies, prayers, prophecies, etc.?** One proper forum for the expression of all or any of these is during the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper as a full meal (which is to occur weekly). Also, if a church has the type of community (body life) that it is supposed to have, the members will see each other regularly throughout the week and during these frequent contacts many outlets for communication will exist.

**Suppose a mother finds it necessary to call down her wayward child during a meeting; would this be a violation of the “silence in church” view?** Not necessarily. It could be acceptable, though of course she should be as considerate as possible. The point of the paragraph is that a woman should not address the whole assembly. The discrete calling down of a wayward child may be overheard by the church, but since it was intended only for the child, and not for the church, it is not a violation of the passage.

**Suppose someone requests a hymn be sung and two women rise simultaneously to play a piano accompaniment. Seeing each other, they briefly discuss which one will serve the church by playing. Would this be a violation of the “silence in church” view?** It would be acceptable. Even though the church may overhear the exchange, the words were not intended for the whole church.

**Why is it not inconsistent to forbid a woman from requesting a song, and yet allow her to request it of her husband, who then relays the request to the church?** The reason this is not inconsistent is due to the fact that the requirement for women to be silent does not mean women may not influence the course



of the meeting. It only means that they must do so through their husband, father, or other respected man present. Upon hearing his wife whisper the song request to him, the husband may, in turn, request the song of the church, or he may think it better to wait until a later time.

**Suppose a house church had twenty members (“the whole church,” 14:23) and during the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting the women were not allowed to speak. However, if those same twenty people (“the whole church,” 14:23) gathered one evening for a prayer meeting or Bible study, the women presumably could speak. Why the difference?** 1 Corinthians 14 deals with the more formal meeting of the entire church, when everyone is expected to be in attendance, gathered together on the Lord’s Day, the purpose of which is the edification of the church and (if necessary) to make binding decisions regarding the correct application of Scripture (see the study on the meaning of *ekklesia*). In contrast, other types of gatherings typically do not occur on the Lord’s Day (though they might), everyone in the church is not necessarily expected to attend (though they might), the rules of 1 Corinthians 14 are not applicable (it may be more of an apostolic meeting), and no binding decisions as an *ekklesia* would typically be made. Thus, there is a difference in purpose and authority between a 1 Corinthians 14 meeting and other, lesser, types of gatherings.

**Some have suggested that the women sat on one side of the room during church and the men on the other. What Paul was really prohibiting, they say, is the disruption of the meeting when women would shout out questions to their husbands. How would you evaluate this suggestion?** Absolutely nothing in the text of 1 Corinthians 14 suggests a physical separation between the men and the women. Further, there is no exegetical, archaeological, historical, or literary evidence that any early church ever separated the men from the women in their seating arrangements. Moreover, early church meetings were held in private homes, not special buildings. Such a small setting would make a separation of the sexes impractical. Finally, Paul instructs all women to be silent, not just some supposedly unruly ones.

**In the book of Proverbs, God’s wisdom is personified as a woman preacher who stands in the streets and warns men about their sin (Pr. 8:1-21). If God was against women preachers, why would he offer us this picture?** First, the metaphorical woman preacher in Proverbs was not preaching in a church meeting! She was calling out in the streets. Women may freely exercise their prophetic and evangelistic gifts in ministry to the lost. Second, no one (man or woman) ever preached in a New Testament church meeting anyhow. New Testament preaching is exclusively associated with evangelism and occurred apart from assemblies of believers.

**Isn’t the “women’s silence” issue just a dead-end street, a distraction from things that matter, and fertile field for division and every type of problem?** Was the Holy Spirit mistaken to introduce such a “dead-end street” onto the pages of Holy Scripture? Certainly some things in the Bible are more important than others. Even so, God meant for us to do something with 1 Corinthians 14:33-34. Who are we to argue with our Master over what He wants of us? Who are we to decide which of His commands we will obey and which we will disobey? Or which of his precepts are a “distraction”? When the church obeys her Lord, despite what worldly culture thinks, “division and every type of problem” are often the result. But are we seeking to please the Lord, or the world? Or ourselves? Perhaps the best answer to this question is the one Paul gave, “If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored” (14:38).

**At what point in the life of a church should this inflammatory topic be introduced?** This topic needs to be patiently taught, and in love. One really amazing aspect of 1 Corinthians is that it was given as spiritual baby food to make its recipients grow. And what a diet they were fed, women’s silence and all! Yet in 1 Corinthians we see the effectiveness of not babying them (Paul did not avoid the many difficult issues raised) in the happy results described in 2 Corinthians 7:8-16.



**What if I just can't decide what the correct application of this passage is?** If there is any doubt over the correctness of a stricter versus a more liberal application of a command, it is generally better to take the more conservative approach so as to be sure God's intent is accomplished. In *Knowing Scripture*, R.C. Sproul wrote: "What if, after careful consideration of a biblical mandate, we remain uncertain as to its character as a principle or custom . . . Would it be better to treat a possible custom as a principle and be guilty of being over-scrupulous in our design to obey God? Or would it be better to treat a possible principle as a custom and be guilty of being unscrupulous in denoting a transcendent requirement of God to the level of a mere human convention? I hope the answer is obvious" (p. 111).

**If the women speak during the Lord's Table (but not the 1 Corinthians 14 time), how does one justify that? If the "meeting was a meeting" and the meal is the purpose and focal point of the gathering, then wouldn't any biblical restrictions on what is done in the meeting have to apply to the focal point of the meeting? Why would the biblical restrictions apply to the non-focal point of the meeting, but NOT apply to the focal point of the meeting?** The main reason given in Scripture for a weekly church meeting is indeed to celebrate the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11b). However, it is also evident from Scripture that when they met to eat, they also usually followed the meal with a time of teaching, singing, etc. (1 Corinthians 14). There are thus two phases to every church meeting: The Lord's Supper phase followed by the Participatory Meeting phase. The goal of each is the edification of the church. However, each phase accomplishes edification in differing ways, under differing regulations. What is appropriate activity for one may not be appropriate for the other.

In Jewish thought, dining with someone was the perfect setting for fellowship. For instance, during the Lord's Supper, since the Supper is a full meal and designed to be a time of fellowship, no one person typically seeks to address the entire church. Instead, it is a time of one-on-one interaction, multiple simultaneous conversations going on. It was a party atmosphere, like a wedding banquet. The fare is edification through food and fellowship, centered around one cup and one loaf. It is a sacred, covenant meal. Two of the main regulations for the Supper: wait for one another and be sure there are no divisions among you.

1 Corinthians 14, on the other hand, deals with rules regulating those who would seek to address the entire church in plenary session. This participatory phase of the meeting, originally following the Supper, is the appropriate venue for a brother to bring a teaching, to suggest a song, etc. Everyone is to listen as only one person at a time addresses the group. Edification is the goal during this time also, but accomplished through a much more structured time of teaching, singing, testimony, prayer, prophecy, etc. One of the main regulations for the 1 Corinthians 14 time: only one person at a time is to address the group. Personal, on-going conversations that were the norm for the Supper are inappropriate during the 1 Corinthians 14 time. Similarly, to squelch fellowship during the Supper and ask everyone to be quiet so as to listen to one person teach, forcing everyone else to chew in silence, would be out of place. It would also be hard to sing songs of praise with a mouth full of food (not to mention unsightly!).

In sum, the purpose of the Lord's Supper is edification through fellowship. The Supper is to be like a beehive of buzzing and activity and interaction. Thus, the silence requirement of 1 Corinthians 14 would not apply at all to the Lord's Supper portion of a church meeting. The purpose of the 1 Corinthians 14 phase of the gathering is also edification, but through the exercise of the more public ministry gifts (like teaching and prophecy). The 1 Corinthians 14 phase is also the time for decision-making, the time when the court is in session.

**Let The Women Speak!**

The New Testament teaches us that at the foot of the cross there is neither “male nor female” (Ga 3:28), and that women as well as men are “priests” (Re 1:6). Although the New Testament clearly teaches that “the head of woman is man” (1 Corinthians 11:3), it also teaches that in the Lord “woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman” (1 Corinthians 11:11). Though it teaches that wives should submit themselves to their husbands (Ep 5:22), it also requires: “all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (1Pe 5:5). Further, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:5, taught a “mutual consent” aspect of marriage. Since the sisters are equal heirs with the brothers “of the gracious gift of life” (1Pe 3:7), let’s hear what some of the sisters think about the Lord’s command that women remain silent in church:

“When God showed me His order — man as servant leader and the wife as his help mate — silence in the worship services was a relief. Before I understood this truth, I felt obligated to speak up because I thought this was my “Christian duty or responsibility.” After speaking I would feel agitated - “Did I say too much?” “Did I make sense?” But when I embraced God’s order, I no longer felt I had to prove my spirituality with words. Submission to God’s order was what He required of me. When I am under God’s authority, I am also under His divine protection, and to me this is true freedom of worship!”

-- Teri S.

“I love to listen to my husband teach. I enjoy listening to and participating in the theology talks around my kitchen table. I ask thought provoking questions and often help him in the thinking process as he hashes through some points of scripture. Yet, I do not teach nor have a desire to teach during our church meetings.

It is not a question of ability, but one of where I fit into God’s plan of order. I submit willingly to His plan for the church and focus my attention on striving to be the best wife and mother I can and helping my husband realize his full potential as leader of our household and at church. My outlet for teaching comes in interaction with my kids, helping a less experienced mother with parenting, “wifing” and homemaking skills and in counseling a sister in a problem that relates to a path down which the Lord has already taken me.

I am doing the things the Lord set up for me as a quiet worker at home. So much of my time is spent doing the things I know for certain, scripturally, God has commanded women, that I have no desire to speak in the meeting. I gladly leave that to the men and rejoice as they grow and mature, following the plan God has laid out for them.”

-- Sandra A.

I’m the outgoing one in our family. With a degree in Speech Communication and years of Bible teaching experience, you’d think the Bible would command me to speak in public meetings! (But then again, Moses thought God should choose Aaron.)

In past years, the biggest complaint I’ve heard from women is that their husbands would not lead at home. Over and over this was the case. We’d pray about it, agonize and wonder why our husbands wouldn’t follow our prompting to lead us! Women came to me looking for scriptural answers, bypassing the spiritual authorities in their life.

Eventually, God humbled me. The Bible commands me to “submit to” and “respect” my husband. I was to have a “gentle & quiet spirit.” When we are eager to speak our mind, we fail to follow our husbands and ultimately, God. How could my husband lead when that position was already taken by me?

When we came to understand the COMMAND of women’s silence in the Lord’s Day assembly, it was such a blessing! When the women keep silent, the men lead. As a result, my husband has grown so much

in his knowledge of the Lord. He takes seriously his role to teach me and our children. No longer do I wrestle with the men over theology or with my husband over interpretation. We discuss scripture and he takes into consideration my thoughts, feelings and impressions. By keeping quiet and listening to him, God has elevated my husband in my eyes and heart. It is such a joy to hear my husband contribute each week as the Lord leads him. I'm not oppressed and I'm not a doormat. God still speaks to me and through me. God still uses my speaking talents, just in different arenas! I am so blessed to be under my husband's protection. I'm so content in this role. It did take some getting used to - biting my tongue a few times - but God has shown me that to be silent on the outside can bring a wonderful peace on the inside."  
-- Connie T.

"For me, coming from an institutional church setting where everyone is quiet but the pastor, the concept of women remaining silent in church meetings doesn't seem all that unusual. However, when you move into a first-century setting, this suddenly becomes an issue.

In my walk with Christ I have learned that God has a role for everyone, be they parents, children, husbands, wives, servants or masters. I feel that as a woman I have an important role in the church, but that role does not include addressing the entire body during the Lord's Day church meeting. This is not because I am inferior, or less intelligent than a man, but because it is not my God-given role to lead, but to be in submission to my husband who is my head as Christ is his head. So, being silent in the church meeting does not make me feel subservient to anyone but to Christ and it gives me an opportunity every Sunday to be obedient to the command given to women in I Corinthians 14. In this way I am blessed to know that by the simple act of being quiet, I am in the center of God's will for me."  
--Deedee W.

"After participating in a fellowship for eight years where the women are silent, I have come to realize in a greater way that being silent doesn't mean being inactive. I feel like I have a very active supportive role in the meeting. Women's silence applies to leading out rather than joining in. When we worship in song I sing with the others, and how I participate affects those around me. How I listen to those who share affects (encourages or discourages) them. Often when I feel like I have a thought or song that would be a blessing for the others I will pray and ask the Lord to share that through one of the men. Sometimes He does and it is a blessing to me to see the Lord's hand working in or through me. The women being silent in our fellowship has been an exercise of faith that has truly been a blessing.

In our family Jonathan is the outgoing one, so it is easy for me to sit back and let him take the lead. But I have noticed in families where the wife would (personality-wise) be the leader, in our fellowship settings, because she is expected to be silent, the husband of the family will take the lead and not feel threatened. I have had women come to me after a meeting expressing such gratitude that their husband has felt free to share because they know that is not his natural inclination. The women have seen growth in their husbands as leaders that they have longed for.

The positive changes in the women have been gratifying, too. The women who would typically be the outgoing one in their family, but who really want their husbands to be the leader, are learning how to step back. They are finding that if they can learn to listen and wait, the Lord can do mighty things."

Connie L.

## **Conclusion**

Sometimes those who "explain away" those passages of scripture that seem to limit women's roles in ministry fail to see the overall picture of God's family order, set at creation that encompasses both the Old Covenant and the New. The church is primarily made up of families. For church order to contradict the

order of the family (Ep 5) would be disorder and chaos. The Lord created and gifted men and women with complimentary ministry roles. Truly understanding God's order in both the family and the church causes us to realize that these "limiting passages" are not so much restrictive as protective. They protect women from the burden of leadership and of having to function as men. They also encourage men to be servant leaders. And, He is presenting to us a picture of Christ and His bride, the church, which is submissive to Christ as Head.

The women's silence is both an object lesson and an application of the order that is to exist in the home and the church. It encourages the men to take the lead in the meeting, to be responsible for what goes on, to verbally participate, to begin to articulate their thoughts, to learn to be leaders, etc. For instance, one wife joyously observed that the quieter she was in the interactive church meeting, the more her passive husband spoke up and took the lead (see 1Pe 3:1-2).

Harvey Blueborn makes this astute parallel: "Was there anything necessarily evil in the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil? No, Scripture is clear that all things have a lawful use under God (Ge 1:31; 1Ti 4:4; Ro 14:14, 20; 1 Corinthians 10:23, 25, 26). The fruit was not evil. The evil came from how the fruit was used. The fruit was a test of obedience. All that Adam and Eve knew was good. But once they ate from the forbidden fruit, they entered into the knowledge of evil also – the knowledge of non-submission to God's revealed will. Mankind fell into sin, spiritual blindness, and death, because a woman talked in the midst of the garden while a man remained silent and deferred to the woman. There is nothing evil about speaking. Evil comes only from how the speaking is used. Women are natural talkers.

On the whole, studies have shown that women are more articulate than men, and women say twice as many words as men. What better way to test women's submission to God in the garden of God – which is the gathered assembly, the inner sanctuary – than to place in the midst of the garden the tree of speaking and non-speaking, and to say, 'Women shall not speak, but shall learn in silence, deferring to their men; for it is shameful for women to speak in the gathered assembly.' But then along comes the subtle suggestion, 'Yea hath God said, 'Women shall not speak in the midst of the garden, but they shall learn in silence and submission, lest they be brought to shame?' They shall not be brought to shame, for in the day the women speak, their mouths shall be opened and they shall be as men, not being deprived of their right to speak the Word of God which comes in and goes out from them. If anyone is a prophet or spiritual, then let him acknowledge that women's silence is not the commandment of the Lord, but is only a short-term accommodation to the shameful female oppressed, male-dominated culture of ancient times.'"

This is a serious issue with far reaching consequences regardless of how it is applied. We all have to do something about this passage at least on a weekly basis, and for me the simplicity of taking God's words at face value is the only approach with which I am at peace. My purpose in writing has been to offer a biblical alternative to the prevailing approaches that are common today, not to attack those who hold views contrary to mine. It has not been convenient for me to hold to the above application and frankly, I sometimes wish I did not see it the way I do. Over the years I have received a storm of contentious protest over my understanding of this passage, wherein both my motives and even ancestry were questioned! According to some, I am part of a "devilish scheme" of Scripture "twisting." I thus feel keenly the importance of being careful to respect those who sincerely hold to applications which differ from one's own position. For those reading this who have not made a decision on how to apply 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35, please realize that we cannot simply stick our heads in the sand and pretend this passage does not exist. As Paul warned, "If he ignore this, he himself will be ignored" (14:38).