

The Role of Women in the Church

1 Cor. 14:34-36

Intro: In our lessons so far we have focused on Paul's instructions to Timothy concerning the role of women in mixed gatherings (including presumably the assembly). We have learned that:

Men are to lead in worship

Women are to dress modestly.

They are to learn with all submissiveness. In this sense, they are to be "quiet", but not necessarily non-vocal.

They are not to teach or exercise dominion over men. In this sense they are to be completely "silent".

Now let's turn our attention to 1 Cor. 14.

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? (*1 Corinthians 14:34-36*)

As in all churches of the saints

The original text did not include punctuation and sometimes there are places where a phrase may appropriately go with either the sentence that precedes or follows it.

The Nestle-Aland Greek text places this phrase in connection with v. 34. If it properly belongs, there it gives special weight to the idea that Paul's teaching concerning women here is not unique to Corinth; but is in fact the universal practice of the church. It is one of four times Paul makes this appeal in this letter. Here it is clear that whatever Paul teaches the church in Corinth he would have taught the church in other places.

We are led to the conclusion that 1 Tim. 2 and 1 Cor. 14 must harmonize since God's instructions are universal to the churches.

Note that "churches" here could be properly translated "assemblies" in the more specific sense of gatherings of saints for worship.

Let the women be silent in the church

There is no word for "your" as in the KJV. That is a contextual addition by the translators.

The word "women" translates "gunaikes" which may mean either women or wives. The context must guide us as to which is the appropriate sense.

"Be silent" translates a Greek imperative meaning "to be silent".

It has the sense of being non-vocal.

Notice that this command is also given to some of the men.

but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. (*1 Corinthians 14:28*)

But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. (1 Corinthians 14:30)

The silence enjoined does not apply beyond the action regulated.

Men who can speak in tongues but have no interpreter are told to “keep silent”. This means that they cannot speak in tongues. It does not mean that they must be otherwise non-vocal.

A man addressing the assembly is told to “keep silent” when a revelation has been made to another who is seated. This means he cannot speak while the other man is speaking. It does not mean that he must otherwise be non-vocal.

Likewise the women are urged to “be silent”. This means they must not speak in whatever sense Paul has in mind. It does not mean that they must otherwise be non-vocal. I elaborate more on this when we look at the second phrase.

If the silence enjoined upon the women demands that they be non-vocal in every way, then the same would be true for the men who are urged also to be silent.

Again the word “church” is likely used here in the sense of the assembly itself. Much like we say we are going to “church”.

For they are not permitted to speak,

“For” is the common Greek word for explanation or elaboration.

“they are not permitted” translates a passive verb meaning “to not be permitted or entrusted or turned to”.

“To speak” translates the Greek infinitive meaning “to talk”. It refers to the common word for “speaking”. But here it is used to refer to a particular kind of speaking.

Notice how that throughout the chapter Paul has used the word “speak” to describe the action of addressing the assembly for the purpose of instruction. At least 11 times Paul uses the word in this sense to describe the exercise the gifts of tongues and prophecy. however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue. (1 Corinthians 14:19)

Notice what is involved in this speaking to the assembly

Only one person may speak at a time (v. 27). The speaker has total control over the assembly.

The speaker is standing up (which accentuates the idea of authority over the assembly, v. 30.)

The speaker is obligated to silence only if the Holy Spirit intervenes with revelation to others (v. 30).

It is speaking that by nature would involve the issue of authority (cf. v. 34).

Notice that not all “speaking” is forbidden.

speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; (*Ephesians 5:19*)

The same Greek word is used in Eph. 5 that is found in 1 Cor. 14. The inescapable conclusion is that the prohibition to speak in 1 Cor. 14 is speaking in which the woman is exercising dominion over men and not all speaking.

But let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

This shows that the speaking involves the exercise of dominion. Subjection result that the woman does not speak.

The women are commanded to respect the order of headship taught in the Law. The reference seems to be to Genesis 3 where the woman is placed under man's dominion or rule.

To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, In pain you shall bring forth children; Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (*Genesis 3:16*)

This statement suggests that there is a continuity of role between the OT and the NT.

In the OT women were not the spiritual leaders of the people.

They did have the opportunity to speak in Israel's assemblies concerning matters of importance to them (Num. 27:1-5).

Notice the harmony between 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Timothy 2, both of which teach the same principles.

In 1 Tim. 2 Paul urges women not to teach or exercise dominion but to be silent.

In 1 Cor. 14 Paul urges women not to "speak" but to be silent.

In both texts Paul uses the same Greek word meaning non-vocal.

The speaking of 1 Cor. 14 being forbidden is instructing the assembly.

And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home

Just as a woman might exercise dominion by "speaking". She may also exercise dominion by "questioning" in the assembly.

Some scholars have inferred from this statement that this order was addressed particularly to the wives of prophets, who were interrupting their husbands, as they prophesied, by questions in the assembly. It may have been that this "questioning" was a way of teaching the assembly under the guise of learning. Whatever the motivations, it is clear that this questioning moved beyond the proper "quietness" that the Scripture enjoins upon women in learning.

Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. (*1 Timothy 2:11*)

Remember that this text does not call upon women to be non-vocal; but quiet. Submissiveness is indicated by disposition not silence.

However, 1 Tim. 2 implies that it is possible for a women to demonstrate an unsubmitive disposition in learning.

And in 1 Cor. 14 we see the manifestation of it in the women seeking to direct the assembly by questions—questions that they could have had answered by their husbands without disturbance to the assembly. The fact that they felt compelled to ask them in the assembly when they could have been answered otherwise reveals either a desire for attention or an inclination to control their husbands, both of which are inappropriate. If for example during the course of this lesson my wife had interrupted me to ask questions we would all consider it out of place.

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

“Improper” translates a word meaning “ugly, shameful, base”. It is a term of strong repulsion. Paul uses it again of women when he speaks of the “shame” of cutting off all their hair.

Notice how again it is “speaking” of a certain kind that is shameful. It is speaking in which the woman exercised dominion over men.

When in mixed gatherings (whether assemblies or classes) women quietly learn and respond to the leadership of the assembly or class she is living in harmony with Biblical teaching.

We should seek to apply this teaching respecting the boundaries God has placed upon the women’s role without being oppressive by not allowing her participation in the worship and work of the church.