

# “Women ‘Keeping Silence in Church’ in 1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 14”

1 Cor. 14:26-33a; 14:33b-36; 37-40 (related: Galatians 5:22-23)

11/5/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

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There are a substantial number of biblical scholars who think that in chapter 14, verses 33b through 36 were inserted by a scribe who was writing copies early in the manuscript duplication process. That’s because verse 37 seems to flow more naturally from 33a than it does from verse 36. You can follow this reading in the bulletin on page 3 as it is read from verse 26 to 33a, and then over to verse 37 (following the arrows).

## Reading Here:

<sup>26</sup>What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. <sup>27</sup>If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three and each in turn; and let one interpret. <sup>28</sup>But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. <sup>29</sup>Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. <sup>30</sup>If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. <sup>31</sup>For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. <sup>32</sup>And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, <sup>33</sup>for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

(As in all the churches of the saints, <sup>34</sup>women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. <sup>35</sup>If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. <sup>36</sup>Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?)

<sup>37</sup>Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. <sup>38</sup>Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized. <sup>39</sup>So, my friends, be

eager to prophesy and do not forbid speaking in tongues; <sup>40</sup>but all things should be done decently and in order.

Notice, then how verses 33b-36 seem to be an interruption from the content of the verses before them. In verses 26-32a, Paul was trying to correct the apparent chaos that was happening in their worship services when people stood up and either taught a Christian lesson (preaching) or spoke in tongues. So just listen to how abrupt the transition is when we hear the few verses before, again starting at verse 31 but this time reading through verse 36.

## The Second Reading:

<sup>31</sup>For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. <sup>32</sup>And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, <sup>33</sup>for God is a God not of disorder but of peace. (As in all the churches of the saints, <sup>34</sup>women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. <sup>35</sup>If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. <sup>36</sup>Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?)

This self-contained set of verses upsets the context and interrupts Paul’s theme of prophecy – spoiling the flow of thought.<sup>1</sup> At first hearing, it even seems to contradict Paul’s words in chapter eleven where the active leadership and participation of women in the worship was already accepted by Paul – only he wished they would wear veils when doing so. So the context of this chapter appears to be talking about how all of them should do their volunteer preaching – but do it *one at a time* and do the same thing when they *start a favorite hymn, or speak in a tongue with an interpretation: do it in an orderly*

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<sup>1</sup> As says Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, p.246 ISBN 0-8006-6005-6.

*manner*, one at a time (he was saying). Then there is the abrupt sidebar supposedly about ‘women keeping quiet, being subordinate and asking husbands their questions at home.’ Just after these three abrupt verses, it returns again to talk about preaching.

To be credible in our study of this part of the Bible, we have to go to work. Just because something is abrupt and apparently not consistent with the preceding context, it doesn’t (in itself) mean that a scribe just put it in there to clarify something or mistakenly had thought that piece of text was originally to go there. Let’s press on and do a little more work.

In this case, we get our best clues from the context of the passage (which is usually the first thing people skip when they don’t do their homework).

The real and the biggest issue that prompts Paul’s letter to this Corinthian church is the relationship between prophecy (defined by Paul as what we call preaching<sup>2</sup> today) and speaking in tongues (or “Glossolalia”).<sup>3</sup> The context of this is Paul’s overall section from 11:2-14:40. He has been dealing with misuses of prophecy and speaking in tongues in their worship services.<sup>4</sup> The more immediate context consists of the “rules” for order in their worship.

Paul’s controlling argument or point is that all of them have spiritual gifts and there are a variety of them. However these spiritual gifts are used, love and edification of the whole church community should be governing the use of each gift – not personal pride or some false sense of spiritual achievement.

As we noted before, it is clear that women were praying and preaching (prophesying) in the services.<sup>5</sup> The specific problem being discussed was

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<sup>2</sup> A rational word of comfort or encouragement, immediately comprehended by the mind and has, as its chief goal, edification of the body of believers.

<sup>3</sup> Which is a transliteration of a Greek work meaning to babble in a strange tongue. In Paul’s description in Corinthians, it is a non-rational speech rather than known and/or indefinable human language which has, as its chief goal, the private edification of the individual and one’s personal relationship with God.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Scholer “1 Corinthians 14:33-36: Its Interpretation and the Status of Women” a monograph of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary 10/26/72.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:5

that certain women in that church were *interrupting* the services by asking questions and carrying on discussions. For women to be able to stand before the gathered worshipping community – it was a new experience because many of them had been raised in the Jewish culture that didn’t allow women to be in the worship room. So in the new religion of Christ followers, women found themselves among those who were leading the worship by calling out a hymn, reading an old testament text, perhaps reading one of Paul’s letters,<sup>6</sup> preaching, speaking in tongues or interpreting the tongues that had just been uttered.

In first century Christian congregations, they kept some of the traditions from Judaism. While they didn’t prohibit women from being in or leading the worship (by keeping them hidden behind room dividers) as the Jewish culture had done, they apparently did have the men sit on one side and the women on the other side of the room. Don’t forget, this church met in a home large enough to hold 50 to 100 people at most. So here is how we would try to reconstruct the scene.

Some women, whose husbands were sitting across the room, apparently were calling across the aisle to their husbands, indicating their approval of a particular point in the sermon. Some of them might have called out, “Say Harry, did ya hear that? I wish you’d listen to *that* point because if you did, it sure would help all of us back at the house!”

Judging from the fact that Paul, in the preceding verses,<sup>7</sup> had to tell them to take their turn and let only one person at a time preach, speak in a tongue or interpret the tongue, he apparently was doing the same thing here. Paul was just trying to get them to stop interrupting the speaker up front and wait their turn.



Have you ever seen a segment of the English Parliament discussions on television? In these, we see a speaker – whether it is a member of the Royal Family or one of the people with the traditional wig and scholar’s black robe – addressing the lawmakers. And right in the middle of a point the speaker is making, someone stands up and makes a wisecrack or

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<sup>6</sup> this one or Colossians being the only ones written at that point

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor. 14:26-33a

an opposing statement – to which everyone laughs or applauds – but the speaker, maintaining his or her composure, continues on. *We* watch that and feel appalled, saying to ourselves, “what a free-for-all, . . . how rude!” But it is a different culture than ours.

It was getting to be chaotic in *their* worship services. They were interrupting one another and they weren’t taking their turn so Paul was all over them for that.

To further press the importance of orderliness in their worship, Paul mentioned the Jewish tradition that taught women to subordinate their personal interests to the higher priority of worship and the study of the Torah “even as the law says” (in verse 34). But here, the context of the very next verse, makes it clear that Paul was not issuing a mandate that ‘all women were to adopt a vow of silence when they walked in the church door.’ He said, in verse 35, “If there is anything they want to know, let them ask their husbands at home” – clearly alluding to the fact that some of the more extrovert women were calling across the aisle to speak to their husbands.

Some women, then, were so anxious to express themselves in the service, that they got carried away and interrupted the worship with their conversations. “Have these exchanges when you get home” Paul apparently was saying. But then, it was a different culture than ours.

But however we conclude with this difficult passage, it is clear that the writer was requesting those women to subordinate themselves, in a traditional sense, to what was going on in that worship. Perhaps the request for those women to back off was said in a similar way to what a church leader later suggested in the pastoral epistles (that Paul didn’t write). But if we took this text to be prohibiting all Christian women from participating in leading in worship, it would be totally inconsistent with all Paul had said about the women who led in various churches. It would be absolutely contrary to Paul’s teachings about the equality of women with men.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> P. Siddons, *Speaking Out For Women*, pages 66-67 ISBN 0-8170-0885-3. See “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28).

To conclude, then, Paul was dealing with one very particular problem in the order of their worship services: wives who were disrupting the worship service with questions which Paul thought they should be asking at home.<sup>9</sup> Paul’s suggesting that it was “shameful for a women to speak (out) in church” was similar to his thought of the shameful of the women leading church without wearing their veils on their heads (that he went on about back in chapter 11:2-16). Church leaders and biblical interpreters – who have taken this verbal ‘shaming’ out of the immediate context (of this acutely troubled church) and who have tried to present it as a universal statement for all Christian women for all times – those people have completely missed the obvious context of these verses. In doing so, they’ve also done much damage, through the years, to how women feel about themselves in church communities.

How do these words, to these individuals, relate to us today? I actually don’t know.

I believe all of us could benefit from remembering to be polite and orderly – not only during formal worship but anywhere else, for that matter. That would be consistent with Paul’s list of the characteristics of a Christian. He said, “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”<sup>10</sup>

So with all of that work of trying to understand this 2000 year old passage, we are left to ponder, for our own lives, if we are using the gifts God gave us for others in ways that are loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, gentle and with self-control. ■



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<sup>9</sup> As concludes D. M Scholler, already cited.

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 5:22-23