

## 1 CORINTHIANS 14

Examining a difficult or confusing passage of scripture requires a great deal of prayer, thought, study and humility. A person cannot take a passage of scripture such as 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and make it a proof-text for a particular point of view – though many on both sides of these controversial verses have tried to do so. One cannot simply say, “God’s Word says it and that’s good enough for me”. Often, those who make this kind of declaration do not hold the same standard in regard to other puzzling passages. Nor can one simply dismiss a difficult passage of scripture for having cultural implications that do not apply to the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. No, we must examine it in the light of context, content and culture and in full view of Paul’s teaching on church structure and behavior as a whole.

To one degree or another we all pick and choose what we declare to be the unalterable truths found in scripture. The multitude of denominations and ministries found in the world today attest to this fact. One group emphasizes baptism; another spiritual gifts. Some groups insist on tithing, others maintain that because tithing is not taught specifically in the New Testament, believers today are exempt from tithing but should give generously. (2 Cor. 8:7). No matter the theological bent or motivation, even the most learned and serious Bible scholar interprets the Bible according to their own tradition and outlook. My earnest desire and prayer is to make the Word of God alive and applicable to men and women today—to live out God’s eternal truth in our time. Author Scott McKnight puts it this way;

God spoke in Moses’ days in Moses’ ways, and  
God spoke in Job’s days in Job’s ways, and

God spoke in David's days in David's ways, and  
 God spoke in Solomon's days in Solomon's ways, and  
 God spoke in Jeremiah's days in Jeremiah's ways, and  
 God spoke in Jesus' days in Jesus' ways, and  
 God spoke in Paul's days in Paul's ways, and  
 God spoke in Peter's days in Peter's ways, and  
 God spoke in John 's days in John's ways,  
 And we are called to carry on that pattern in our world today.<sup>1</sup>

The book of 1 Corinthians was written in response to reports of the struggles the church was facing. Paul knew this church well. He had spent eighteen months establishing the Corinthian church on his second missionary journey. (Acts 18:1-18) Corinth was a major seaport on the Aegean Sea. The environment in the city was one of idolatry, and sexual immorality of every sort. Paul had heard reports that there were divisions, problems with immorality and confusion and disorder in the young church. The purpose of Paul's writing was to bring correction to problems which had been reported to him by a delegation from Corinth related to conflict in the church, and to answer specific questions church members had written in a previous letter relating to problems of morality and principles of order in the church. The book is broken into two sections. Chapters 1 - 6 deal with division, immorality and disorder in the church; chapters 7 - 16 answer specific questions asked by church members regarding marriage, Christian freedom, public worship and the resurrection.

The portion of the book where our troublesome passage is found is in the section dealing specifically with public worship. (chapters 11-14) Chapter 14 begins with a bridge from the infamous chapter on love. "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy." (1 Cor. 14:1)<sup>2</sup> Though it is often thought of as such, 1 Corinthians 13 is not a chapter dealing with romantic love. It is a message for the body of Christ instructing them how

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<sup>1</sup>Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2008) p. 27, 28.

<sup>2</sup>All scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are from the New International Version.

to relate to one another. Love is the overarching, all-encompassing virtue for every believer. In chapter 8, Paul said it this way, “while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church.” (1 Cor. 8:1b NLT) All of the problems and issues Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians could be corrected if the Church would just live according to the attitudes and actions laid out in chapter 13.

A missing puzzle piece that could have helped us discern the true meaning behind Paul’s words would have been to know the questions that the Corinthian church asked. We only have Paul’s answers and so we can only assume to know the questions. This missing information would have been helpful, but since we do not have it, we must do the best we can with the information we do have.

Over half of chapter 14 – twenty-five of its forty verses are devoted to the misuse of the gift of tongues and prophetic gifts. No specific mention is made regarding gender. Words like “anyone” and “everyone” are used repeatedly. The term “brothers” is also used, but not in the strict sense of a person of male gender, but rather by definition the word *Adelphos* “came to designate a community of love based on the commonality of believers due to Christ’s work.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the Key Word Study Bible, verse 33 indicates that the church was in “state of affairs lacking control, order, or governance.”<sup>4</sup> This is the context of 1 Corinthians 14.

“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. 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 Cor. 14:33-35)

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<sup>3</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D., ed. *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, New International Version* (Chattanooga, TN, AMG International, Inc.)

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

At first glance these verses appear to mean exactly what they say. Women are not allowed to speak in the church. They should be silent and submissive. Period. That would mean no praying, no singing, no speaking whatsoever. Silent, means silent. No evangelical church today is this prohibitive towards women. No church completely silences women. Even churches and denominations who hold to the complementarian<sup>1</sup> view of women in the church allow women to teach or to speak in children's and women's ministries.

If Paul indeed intends for women to be absolutely silent in the churches, why would he give detailed instructions on how a woman should pray and prophecy in the church? (1 Cor. 11:4-5) It may be helpful here to define prophecy. According to the Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, prophecy is defined: "To foretell the future; to declare religious truths, utter forth words of spiritual exhortation, whether involving prediction or not."<sup>5</sup> Clearly if women are to prophecy, they must speak, and speak under the inspiration and authority of the Holy Spirit. Additionally chapter 12 outlines the spiritual gifts which are to be used to benefit the Body of Christ and include speaking gifts and make no distinction between men and women.

Paul clearly demonstrates in Galatians chapter 3 that Christ has broken down the cultural and religious barriers between those who have been saved by faith. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) Under the new covenant, men and women are not just created equal, but are equal for instruction and also for correction. Men and women alike needed correction for behaviors and attitude which were harmful to the Church.

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<sup>5</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D., ed. *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, New International Version* (Chattanooga, TN, AMG International, Inc.)

Some would argue that the verses in chapter eleven deal with prayer and prophecy not specific to the corporate assembly of the Church. A broader view of the book of 1 Corinthians tells us that the entire subject matter relates to the workings of the Church, whether they were meeting in homes or more private settings, or in the public assembly. Additionally, Joel's prophecy and Peter's quotation of it in Acts chapter 2 clearly demonstrates that God intended to pour out His Spirit on men and women and use them in ways that broke with tradition.

“This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.’” (Acts 2:16-18)

Many modern complementarians assert that the injunction to silence was only in regard to judging prophecy since that would be considered teaching and or having authority over men. They maintain that a woman may exercise gifts of inspired speech (praying, prophesying and speaking in tongues), but only if they do not cross the line into teaching or instruction. How could anyone, man or woman declare religious truths or give words of spiritual exhortation without it being considered teaching? Can a woman pray or prophecy and be silent? Either 11 eleven disqualifies chapter 14 or vice versa.

The word silence (*sigao*) is used three times in chapter fourteen. It is used to silence a person who is speaking in tongues and has no interpretation (vs. 28); it is used to limit prophecy to one person at a time (vs. 30) and it is used to prohibit women from asking questions during the church meeting (vs. 34-35). In every case, “the way of love” outlined in chapter 13 and orderly worship gatherings are the principles being illustrated. Craig Keener states, “What is clear from

the context is just that restricting one's own speech is sometimes necessary to preserve congregational order."<sup>6</sup>

Without question, a part of the problem with a lack of order in the church had to do with the behavior of certain women otherwise Paul would not have mentioned it so explicitly. Is Paul's instruction here specifically for the Corinthian women, or is it a universal command for all women across the centuries? Does the command apply only to wives or to all women?

It seems clear that there was an issue between husbands and wives in this situation. The rather lengthy discourse on headship in Chapter 11 illustrates this. The reference to creation order draws our attention back to Genesis 3 and the curse which brought conflict and struggle between husbands and wives. Living the Christian life created new paradigms at every turn for the early Church. The Corinthians were learning a whole new way of living and relating to one another. Since Paul addresses the marriage relationship repeatedly in his writings, this was clearly an area where this new way of living was a challenge. Paul may have been saying to the husbands, "Let your wives learn." and to the wives, "Learn respectfully." Additionally, the injunction to silence appears to be referring to questions, asked at inappropriate times that disrupted the teaching of scripture or the prophetic word, not to general speech.

Verse 34b of 1 Cor. 14 says that women "Must be in submission, as the Law says." No specific law can be found which commands women to silence in public. However Deuteronomy 27:9 states, "'Be silent, O Israel, and listen!'" This kind of silence indicates a command to listen in order to learn and obey rather than to be forever silent. 1 Timothy 2:11 states, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission." The emphasis is on learning, not silence. Women in the Corinthian culture in the first century were generally considered to be less educated than

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<sup>6</sup>Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives; Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul*. (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publisher, Inc. 1992) 83.

their male counterparts. While it is not likely that the women had no knowledge of scripture, it is highly probable that their knowledge was incomplete.

Keener addresses this question in his book, *Paul, Women & Wives*. He states,

“Why would the women in the congregation have been more likely to have asked irrelevant questions than the men? Because, in general, they were less likely to be educated than men. Most Jewish women knew less of the law than most Jewish men, and most Greek women were less accustomed to public lectures than were their husbands.”<sup>7</sup>

It is evident from the context of the entire book of 1 Corinthians that Paul’s motivation was for the Body of Christ—not just the women—to grow up, to learn and become a witness to the Gospel in their culture. Chaos, confusion and an “every man for himself” atmosphere would not be a good witness.

The type of speaking specifically mentioned in verses 34-35 is in the form of asking questions. And according to authors Gill and Cavaness, Paul was not silencing speaking in general, but continual speaking.

“The tense of the verb *laleo* is not the most common tense (the aorist), but the less common Greek tense (the present) which emphasizes linear (on-going\_ action. Thus it is better translated “to keep talking.” Paul is saying in verse 34, “[Women] are not allowed to *keep on talking*,” and in verse 35, “It is disgraceful for a woman to *continually chatter* in church.” The kind of verbal action indicates that it is not women’s vocal participation but the perpetual disruptive rumble of noise that is disallowed.”<sup>8</sup>

Because the women were generally less educated than their husbands, they naturally had many questions. They were not being told not to ask questions – to the contrary, Paul encouraged them to ask questions – but to do it in a place (the home) where it did not constantly interrupt the meeting. According to Keener, it is not likely that the questions arose out of the prophetic word – this would assume that every husband would have been endowed with a prophetic gift. No, Keener asserts that it is more likely that the interruptions came during the exposition of scripture.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. 72

<sup>8</sup>Deborah M. Gill and Barbara Cavaness, *God’s Women Then and Now*, (Springfield, MO, 2004, Grace & Truth Publishing) 135.

Keener says, “This would have caused an affront to more conservative men or visitors to the church, and it would have also caused a disturbance to the service due to the nature of the questions.”<sup>9</sup>

The tone of the instruction here in 1 Corinthians 14 is similar to the instruction Paul gives in regard to observing the Lord’s Supper in chapter 11. Here again the church at Corinth seemed more concerned for their personal rights and expressing their personal freedom in Christ than for the good of the Church as a whole. Keener observes that it is not so much what is being done, but how it is being done.<sup>10</sup> Paul is encouraging women to learn, but he wants them to learn in a way that shows honor and submission to the other members of the Church. Keener says, “In this case, he is not saying, “Let women learn only from their husbands at home, and not in the church services”; he is saying, “Don’t learn so *loudly* in church!”<sup>11</sup>

And that leads us to what I believe to be the real crux of the matter especially in how we apply this passage of scripture to our lives today. It is clear from reading the letters to the churches from Paul, Peter and James that a lack of love and mutual submission caused many problems in the early church just as they do today. Over and over again the early Church was challenged to love, to honor one another, to be humble, to forgive. The heavy chains of the law were being broken, but the freedom that ensued often resulted in an abuse of freedom.

Philippians 2 gives us the template for understanding the confusing and often contentious passage found in 1 Corinthians 14.

“If you have any encouragement from being untied with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider

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<sup>9</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives; Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul*. (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publisher, Inc. 1992) 81.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. 72.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. 72.

others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others,

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:1-11)

If women today would demonstrate this Godly humility combined with Spirit empowered confidence, I am convinced that many of the conflicts and contentions surrounding women in the church could be alleviated. Submission as we have discussed is not being a door mat, but rather it is moving with confidence into the places God has authorized entry. Ephesians 5:21 tells us, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Jesus’ interactions with women created a whole new way of thinking and interacting. While Jesus did not include women among the twelve disciples, He did include them as friends and associates. (Luke 10: 38) He spoke with them and taught them. (John 4:7-26) He touched them and healed them. (Matt. 9:20-22) Mary sat at His feet and learned from Him much to the chagrin of her sister. (Luke 10:39) He allowed another woman to wash His feet with her tears and dry them with her hair when His host Simon had insulted Him by not even offering water to wash His feet and hands. (Luke 7:36-50) Jesus elevated the status of women in a society which looked on women as inferior and unimportant.

If women in ministry today can operate in a spirit and attitude that truly reflects the Spirit of Christ, we will gain access into the areas God is calling us. We need not fear submission. As James clearly states, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.” (James 4:10)

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<sup>i</sup> **Complementarianism** is the theological view that although men and women are created equal in their being and personhood, yet they are created to complement each other via different roles in life and in the church. It is rooted in a literal interpretation of the creation account and the roles of men and women presented in Scripture. It is usually characterized by :

1. belief that God designed marriage to reflect the relationship of Jesus Christ and the Church
2. belief that only men should be appointed into authoritative positions of leadership in the church
3. belief that a Christian wife should submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ
4. belief that a Christian husband should love his wife as Christ loved the church

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5. a generally patriarchal view of the family (the father is responsible to lead, provide for, teach his children to know and love God) as found in Scripture.

<http://www.theopedia.com/Complementarianism>