

3 Compelling Reasons Paul Didn't Silence Women in the Church

First Corinthians 14:34-35 is one of those passages that has been used throughout Christian history to confine and silence women. It reads, "Let your women remain silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak. They are commanded to be under obedience, as the law also says. If they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Cor. 14:34-35).

There are three compelling reasons for rejecting the traditional interpretation of this passage and for digging deeper to discover its real meaning. The reasons are that at face value: (1) this passage is out of sync with the freedom women had under the Old Covenant; (2) it is out of sync with how Jesus treated women; and (3) it is out of sync with what Paul said about women in the same letter.

After presenting the above three reasons for rejecting the traditional interpretation of "silence," we will show the best interpretation of this passage, which is one that makes it compatible with the rest of the letter and with the rest of Scripture.

Reason No. 1

It Would Violate the Freedom Women Knew Under the Old Covenant

Women in the Old Testament were not silent. They functioned as spiritual and civic leaders with God's approval. Take Deborah, for example (Judg. 4-5). She functioned as both a prophetess and a judge, wielding both spiritual and civil authority. She also exercised authority over Israel's military for it was she

that summoned Barak, the military commander, and ordered him to lead a force of ten-thousand men against the Canaanites.

Barak had such respect for Deborah that he refused to go into battle unless she accompanied him. She agreed and led the army of Israel into battle and achieved a great victory over Israel's enemy. Deborah had a husband but in two chapters about her, he is mentioned only once in passing. There is not the slightest hint that she was somehow out of order.

There are other women prophetesses in the Old Testament, including Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Huldah (2 Chron. 34:22-28) and the wife of Isaiah (Isa. 8:3). These women were not silent. The fact that Scripture calls them prophetesses means that God Himself called them to speak on His behalf.

These women are all presented in a positive sense. There is not the slightest hint that they were acting out of order. When Paul says women are to be silent as also the law says, he is obviously not talking about the Torah or Old Testament. There is nothing in the Old Testament about women being silent.

If Paul's statement before us is taken at face value, we must conclude that women had more freedom and opportunity under the Old Covenant than under the New Covenant. This is a compelling reason to assume that Paul did not silence women in this passage and that we must look further to understand what he is really saying.

Reason No. 2

It Would Violate How Jesus Related to Women

Jesus never silenced a woman. He, in fact, approved of women speaking in His name. Take, for example, the woman He encountered at Jacob's well in John 4. She was drawing water and He talked to her about the "living water" that He had come to give.

During the conversation, Jesus revealed Himself to her as the Messiah and she was the first person to whom He revealed Himself in this manner. She was so excited that she left her water pot and rushed back into the city to tell the people of her community that she had met the promised Messiah.

If there was ever a woman that we might expect Jesus to silence, this would have been it. By her own admission she had had five husbands and was living with a man that was not her husband. Jesus, however, was obviously fine with her speaking in his name. There is no indication that he sought to silence her.

There is also the example of Mary Magdalene. The gospel writers are clear that after His resurrection Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene and sent her to tell His male disciples that He was alive.

Jesus was now in His resurrection body and could have just as easily appeared first to His male disciples. Instead, He purposely appeared first to Mary and sent her forth as the first preacher of the Good News of His resurrection. By doing so He made the point in a way that could not be missed that women were to have a voice in His kingdom program.

Yes, Jesus treated women with dignity and respect. He treated them the opposite of how they were treated in the culture of the day. That is why there were many women disciples who followed Him from Galilee to Jerusalem and were the last ones to leave the cross and the first ones at the tomb on that first resurrection morning.

In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul said, "Follow me as I follow Christ." If in 1 Corinthians 14:34 he is silencing women, then Paul is not following Christ for Christ never silenced women, but sent them forth to speak in His name. This is a compelling reason to conclude that Paul is not here silencing women and we must dig deeper to understand what he is really saying.

Reason No. 3

It Would Violate What Paul Has Written in This Same Letter

Another challenge to taking this passage at face value is the fact that it is out of character with what Paul has said earlier in this same letter. For example, in chapter 11, he allows women to pray and prophesy, if for cultural reasons in Corinth, they wear a head covering.

It is also important to note that this passage is part of a larger dialogue about Spiritual gifts, and in typical Pauline fashion, inclusive language is used throughout the discussion.

In I Corinthians 14:23, for example, Paul speaks of the potential of the *whole* church coming together and *all* speaking with tongues. Then in verses 24 and 31, he speaks of the potential for *all* to prophesy. In verse 31, he says *all* may prophesy that *all* may learn and *all* be encouraged.

In no way does Paul imply that *all* does not mean both men and women in these verses. If he had wanted to exclude women he could have done so by using gender-specific language, but he doesn't.

Verse 21 in the King James Version has Paul saying, "In the Law it is written, with *men* of other tongues and other lips will I speak to this people." "Men," however, is not in the Greek, but was added by the translators. The New Revised Standard Version got it right by translating the Greek phrase as, "By *people* of strange tongues ..."

In a similar way, verse 27 in the King James has Paul saying. "If any *man* speak in an unknown tongue..." Again, the King James translators have taken a lot of freedom, for the Greek word translated "man" is *tis*, which actually means "anyone." In this whole discussion about prophecy and tongues in the church, Paul is obviously careful not to exclude anyone from participating because of their sex.

We must remember, too, that Paul did not write in chapters and verses. These divisions were not introduced into Scripture until the fourteenth century. This means that we cannot arbitrarily lift this passage from its context, which is the discussion about spiritual gifts where he uses gender-inclusive language, indicating his assumption that both women and men functioned in these gifts in the church gathering.

This is another compelling reason to assume that Paul is not silencing women and there must be an answer that much of the church has missed.

The Answer to the Dilemma: What Paul Really Said

This answer to this dilemma comes to light when we recall that, in this letter, Paul addresses doctrinal questions that have been posed to him by the Corinthians in a previous letter written to him (1 Cor. 7:1). Throughout this letter, therefore, Paul is responding to doctrinal questions or statements of the Corinthians for the purpose of correcting them.

A clear example of Paul responding to the Corinthians is 1 Corinthians 7:1 (MEV) where he says, "Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman.' There is widespread agreement among New Testament scholars that the part of the phrase, "it is good for a man not to touch a woman" is a statement made by the Corinthians in their previous letter to Paul. He repeats it here as a means of introducing the topic and refuting their stance on the matter.

Another example is 1 Corinthians 12:1, where he says, "Now concerning spiritual gifts," an indication that he is now addressing questions they had posed to him about spiritual gifts. Not only in 7:1 and 12:1, but in other sections of the letter, such as 1:12 and 3:4, Paul quotes or alludes to things the Corinthians themselves have said and then responds to

their statements or slogans in order to correct them.

There is strong textual evidence that in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul is quoting what the Corinthians have said for the purpose of refuting it. This is indicated by Paul's use of a tiny Greek word at the beginning of verse 36, and immediately following the statement about women being silent. It is the word η , which is sometimes used in Greek as an "expletive of disassociation," such as the English, "Nonsense!" or "Rubbish!" or "Certainly not!"

Although the word can have various uses, depending on context, this use was not uncommon in the New Testament era. It is, in fact, used several times in this manner by Paul in this letter. Unfortunately, in most English Bibles, the η has been either left untranslated or translated by a simple "or," which serves to diminish the forceful manner in which Paul is using it.

One example where Paul uses η to refute what the Corinthians have said is 1 Corinthians 6:1, where he mentions their propensity to take one another to pagan courts rather than submitting their contentions to fellow believers. He responds with η (Nonsense!) and then says, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" (1 Cor. 6:2).

Another example is 1 Corinthians 9:8 where Paul confronts their suggestion that he is speaking on his own authority with η (Nonsense!) and then says, "Does not the not law say the same also?"

This use of η to refute a previous statement is confirmed by the massive *Greek-English Lexicon* by Liddell and Scott, which gives a definition of η as "an exclamation expressing disapproval."

This means that in I Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul is quoting what the Corinthians have said in a previous letter about women being silent. He then replies with "an exclamation

expressing disapproval.” He says, “ η ,” meaning “Nonsense!”

Paul then uses η a second time in verse 36. After the first η , in which he rebuts their notion of women being silent, he asks the Corinthians, “Did the word of God come from you? Or did it come from you only?” and follows that question with another η , or “Certainly not!”

Conclusion

This interpretation of I Corinthians 14:34-35 makes the best sense of the data and harmonizes this verse with the Old Testament, with Jesus and with what Paul himself said about women in this same letter. It fits the Paul we know from Acts and his letters who treated women with respect, acknowledged their gifts and recognized them as co-laborers with him in the gospel of Christ. {eoa}

*This article is derived from **Dr. Eddie Hyatt's** book, Paul, Women and Church, available from Amazon and his website at . Check out the website of the International Christian Women's Hall of Fame that Eddie, his wife, Dr. Susan Hyatt, and friends are establishing in Grapevine, Texas, in order to take this message to the world.*