

One Little Word Dispels the Notion That Paul Silenced Women

Many people both inside and outside the church know that Paul said something about women being silent in church. They can't tell you where the passage is found and they know nothing about its context, but they are certain that they understand what Paul meant.

The truth is, however, that Paul never told women to be silent in the church, as will be shown in the following essay. The passage in question is 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 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" (MEV).

There are several immediate and glaring problems with taking this passage at face value. First of all, it is out of character with what we know of Paul from Acts and his other letters where he recognizes women as his co-workers and even recognizes a woman apostle in Romans 16:7. Secondly, this passage is also out of character with what Paul has said earlier in this same letter where women are allowed to pray and prophesy if, for cultural reasons in Corinth, they wear a head covering. Thirdly, what "law" is being referred to in this passage? There is no such law in the Old Testament that demands female silence in the public assembly.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for taking this passage at face value is the fact that it is a part of a larger dialogue about spiritual gifts and, in typical Pauline fashion, inclusive language is used throughout the discussion. In 1 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 KJV 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 NRSV got it right by translating the Greek phrase as, *By **people** of strange tongues...*

In a similar way, verse 27 in the KJV has Paul saying. *If any **man** speak in an unknown tongue ...* Again, the KJV translators have taken a lot of freedom, for the Greek word translated "man" is *tis* and 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 gender.

We must remember too that Paul did not write in chapters and verses. These divisions were not introduced into Scripture until the 14th 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.

Attempts to Solve the Dilemma

Indeed, 1 Corinthians 4:34-35 is so out of character with the rest of this letter that it has led some good evangelical scholars to conclude that Paul did not write these verses. This is the position of Dr. Gordon Fee, a renowned New Testament exegete, who believes that an early scribe/copyist

(remember they didn't have photo copiers) added these words and they found their way into the text (Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 699-708).

Another solution offered by those who already have a bias against women leaders in the church, postulates that this passage bans women from judging the prophecies that come forth in the church gathering. According to this theory, women can prophesy but they cannot judge or discern the prophecies, as was commanded in 14:29. According to the proponents of this theory, women are here forbidden to judge prophecies in the congregation because this would put them in a position of authority over their husbands.

This is the position of Wayne Grudem who insists that Paul's concern in 14:34-35 is to "preserve male leadership in the teaching and governing of the church" (chapter 47 of Grudem's *Systematic Theology*). Fee, however, points out that this passage is so far removed from the command of 14:29 that one wonders how the Corinthians themselves would have made the connection. He then takes Grudem and others to task, saying, "Nothing in the passage itself even remotely hints at such a thing" (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 704).

An older solution to this passage postulates a segregated church gathering with men and women seated on opposite sides of the aisles. According to this theory, Paul, in this passage, is addressing the problem of women calling to their husbands across the aisle and asking questions about what is happening in the meeting. "George, did you hear what he said?" "John, what did he mean by that?"

The problem with this theory is that it assumes a "church" situation that did not exist. There is no evidence that either Jesus or His disciples segregated the disciples according to their gender. In the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost, men and women mingled and prayed together freely (Acts 1:14; 2:1).

This theory also assumes a traditional church setting with a “church” building with divided seating and an aisle in the middle. The fact is, however, that there is no evidence of a church building for the first 200 years of the church’s existence. During the New Testament era, Christians met primarily in homes. Their gathering itself constituted the “church,” not the building in which they met. The meetings were personal and informal and provided the context of passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:26 where Paul recognizes that when the Corinthians come together for “church,” all are involved. *Each of you has a psalm, a teaching, a tongue, a revelation, and an interpretation ...*

The idea of women calling across the aisle to their husbands as the context of the passage in question is a simplistic answer that has no basis in either Scripture or history.

The Answer Is Found in One Tiny Word

This answer to this dilemma comes to light when we recall that, in this letter, Paul answers questions that have been posed to him by the Corinthians in a previous letter written to him. He begins his answer with the phrase “now concerning” and often quotes what they have said in their letter to him.

A clear example of this is 1 Corinthians 7:1 where he says, *Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is not good for a man to touch a woman.* There is wide-spread agreement among New Testament scholars that the part of the phrase, *it is not good for a man 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 for discussion.

Another example is 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 alludes to things the Corinthians themselves have said and then responds. There is strong textual evidence that in 14:34-35, Paul is quoting what the Corinthians said in their letter to him 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 coming immediately after the statement about women being silent. It is the word η , which is often used in Greek as an "expletive of disassociation" such as the English, "Rubbish!" or "Nonsense!" or "Get out of here!" Although the word can have various uses, this use was common in the New Testament era and is often used in this manner by Paul himself.

In 1 Corinthians 6:15, for example, Paul uses η in this way as a rebuttal to a rhetorical question. After informing the Corinthians that they are members of Christ's body, he asks, *Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot?* He then answers his own question with η , which both the NIV and NRSV translate as "Never!" The NKJV translates it as "Certainly not!"

This use of η to dispute 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 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul is quoting what the Corinthians have said about women being silent and then responds with "an exclamation of disapproval" that may be translated as "Nonsense!" or "Never!" or "Certainly not!"

Dr. Eddie L. Hyatt is an author and Bible teacher with a vision for another Great Awakening in America and around the world. His latest book, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, documents how America was birthed out of a great Spiritual awakening and is available from Amazon and his website at .