

Week 6: Women be silent in the churches -

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1 Corinthians 14: 26-40 (Greek/English Interlinear New Testament 1990)

When you come together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification (*NIV for the strengthening of the church*).

²⁷ If anyone **speaks** in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no one to interpret, let him **be silent** in the assembly, and let him **speak** to himself and to God.

²⁹ Let two or three prophets **speak**, and let the others discern what is said. ³⁰ If something is revealed to another sitting nearby, let the first person **be silent**. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. ³² And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets (*NIV subject to the control of the prophets*), ³³ for God is a God not of confusion (*NIV disorder*) but of peace.

As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴ the women in the assemblies should **be silent**. For they are not permitted to **speak**, but let them be submissive (*NIV in submission*), as the law also says. ³⁵ If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their own husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to **speak** in an assembly

³⁶ Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

³⁷ If anyone thinks they are a prophet or a spiritual person, he must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.³⁸ Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized.

³⁹ So, my brothers be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid **speaking** in tongues;

⁴⁰ but all things should be done decently and in order (*NIV in a fitting and orderly way*).

(Note "speak" in Greek (Lexicon & Strong's 2980)= talk, utter, preach, speak, chatter, babble, speak in unfavourable sense; gossip, repetitive meaningless babble eg pagan culture; utterances, talk nonsense, prattle, animal sounds...)

Introduction:

Today we end Part One of our teaching series based on Paul's 1st letter to the young first century church which he had established at Corinth. (Part Two will follow after NAF).

This year in the ACSA we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood in our Province.

Today our focus will be on ONE of Paul's supposedly problematic sayings, that deals with the place of women in the church at Corinth:

"As in all the churches of the saints, the women should be silent...they are not permitted to speak..it is shameful for a woman to speak in an assembly" (1 Cor 14:33-35)

This is not the only time he makes somewhat problematic statements about women. Elsewhere he says:

*"women must cover their heads when they prophecy (1 Cor 11:6)";
"Wives submit to your husbands" (Eph5:22); "I do not permit a woman*

to teach” (1 Tim 2:12); “Women will be saved through childbearing” (1 Tim 2:15) etc

Some of these verses have been taken out of context, applied literally, and used over the years as a weapon to bar women from exercising leadership in the churches, making them feel they are second class citizens, even allowing men to get away with abuse and domestic violence (she did not obey, she must submit). Some of these verses (especially ‘women be silent’ ‘I do not permit a woman to teach’) formed part of heated debates surrounding the ordination of women in the Anglican church (pre-1992). In the 1980’s when I was a Layminister, a certain gentleman in the congregation would get up and march out of church every time I stepped into the pulpit! Sadly in some Christian circles even today I still encounter those who quote Paul to justify the exclusion of women from teaching ministries

Is that really the message of the Bible? Has the Anglican church got it wrong an acting in a way that is contrary to the teaching of scripture?

I don’t have time to examine all of these problematic texts, but invite you to take a closer look with me at our reading for today.

The text : 1 Cor 14:26-35 (focus on vv 33-35) Women be silent

*“As in all the churches of the saints,³⁴ the women in the assemblies should **be silent**. For they are not permitted to **speak**, but let them be submissive (NIV in submission), as the law also says.³⁵ If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their own husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to **speak** in an assembly”*

At face value, a literal reading of this verse looks like Paul is quite adamant that women may be seen but not heard during acts of worship. They must be silent and may not speak.

If you take the approach “The Bible says it, I believe it and that’s all there is to it” then no further discussion is needed and I had better stop talking and sit down! *(Would we be as keen to take a literal application of Jesus’ words in Matthew “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out...if your hand causes you to sin, chop it off”? I think not!)*

However, as I see it, this is a ‘classic text’ that highlights the importance and necessity of following the “basic steps of interpretation” in our quest to come to an understanding of a text written so long ago.

We know that this passage is a section of a ‘corrective letter’ (it’s ‘Genre’) written by Paul to address problems faced by the young newly established Corinthian church in the first century.

We need to try and discern what it meant to its original hearers, in their particular historical and religious context, before we can make the jump in applying it to our lives today.

If we fail to do that, take these verses out of context, read them literally, impose them as ‘sacred truths for all times’ – I believe we might be in danger of distorting their true meaning and enforcing a supposedly God-given ban on women in worship and ministry across the ages that Paul never intended.

Let’s start by examining the **Literary context surrounding our verses.**

(Always interpret a verse in agreement with its context. Don’t read words/verses in a vacuum. Consider the whole. What comes before/afterwards?)

If we read these verses in their literary context (what happens before and afterwards) we find that in chs 11-14, Paul gives corrective teaching in the context of corporate worship. He addresses issues such as appropriate clothing for men/women in worship (11:1-16); abuses at the Lord’s Supper (11:17-34); the use/abuse of spiritual gifts (12:1-31;

14:1-25); disorderly behaviour that does not edify the church (14:26-40).

The particular verses silencing women, are found in the immediate context of a discussion about “**Orderly worship**”.

So we need to consider: What might a worship service look like in the Corinthian Church that prompts Paul to write about it? What problem was he addressing?

(Vs 26) We see that enthusiastic worshippers wanted to share hymn, words of instruction, revelations, tongues, interpretations). Those are all good and must be done for the strengthening of the church (edification).

However it seems there is a problem: a LACK of order and discipline which negatively affects their worship and is not glorifying to God nor does it benefit the church.

Too many people are speaking at the same time, and not listening to one another. Prophecies were not being tested. Tongues were given without interpretations. Disciplinary measures needed to be put in place. Certain people need to be silenced so that order can be restored and the church strengthened.

Let's take a closer look at words/phrases that are repeated and need closer attention.

“**Be silent**” (Strong's Greek Dictionary – not permitted to speak, keep silence, hold peace)

“**speak**” (talk, utter, preach, speak, chatter, babble, gossip, utterances rather than meaningful communication etc)

Who must be silenced? 3 categories of people:

- (vs 28 if someone speaks in tongues without an interpreter, then they must stop and “*be silent*’ because *that is not helping anyone*;

- prophets must speak one at a time- but they must *be silent* if someone else gets a revelation;
- women be silent

The reason why such people must be silent was simple: because “*Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way*” (vs 40) for “*God is not a God of disorder but of peace* (vs 33). Clearly these people were speaking in a way that was not meaningful; it did not serve to instruct and encourage others, and was neither orderly nor beneficial to the church (vs 19, 26, 31).

Why should women in particular be silenced?

Consider the historical context concerning women at worship

Background: The city of Corinth was made up of people from all sorts of backgrounds – pagan, Greek, Jew, slaves, wealthy. The newly established Corinthian church therefore had converts from a variety of different religious backgrounds.

There are many indications that converts from the cult of Bacchus (Dionysus) were exerting an unhelpful influence on the church at Corinth.

Pagan cults: Cult of Bacchus (Dionysiac cult) *madness, wine*

Characteristics of Worship:

- Women were the leaders
- Drunkenness, dancing, various stages of undress part of worship rituals
- Women would tear a live animal apart, eating its raw flesh
- Women doing war-like dances, making uproar/noise, clanging cymbals and bashing drums, high-pitched chanting and screaming.
- Excessive, wild, unruly behaviour.

- ‘tongue of Bacchus’ referred to meaningless babble

Jewish context

- Men & women sat separately in synagogue
- Women known to be noisy and loud, chatting and gossiping to one another in the balcony and shouting/calling down from balcony to their husbands.
- This behaviours was improper and disruptive – so a law was made ordering them to be silent in the synagogues
- Jewish women not educated (It was a sin for a Rabbi to teach a woman) – so when they talked in church, they displayed their ignorance. Good candidates to spread heresy!

From the historical context I suggest it is reasonable to assume that once women were converted to Christianity, the danger existed that they would bring these disruptive behaviours into the church. Use your imagination now and picture what an act of worship might look like in the Corinthian Church!

Original audience. *So If we Read the passage in the light of what it probably meant to those for whom it was originally written- I proposed it is reasonable to suggest that the reason women needed to be silenced was because of their unhelpful and disruptive behaviours during worship.*

Is there a principle being taught? How might we apply it today?

Bearing in mind both the historical/religious context (including women in cultic and Jewish worship), as well as the literary context (order in worship), what is the real issue being addressed here?

Paul is stressing that acts of worship must be held in a proper and orderly way. These verses commanding women to be silent need to be read in the light of this instruction.

Paul is addressing a problem of noisy interruptions and unhelpful behaviour of the women (and several men speaking in tongues and prophesying at the same time) in the church at Corinth, which needs to be stopped.

Therefore, I suggest, we could state the principle like this:

ANYONE (male or female) who disrupts acts of worship or engages in unruly, unhelpful behaviour in church should *be silenced*. (“*things should be done decently and in order*” vs 40)

ANYONE (male or female) who speaks or teaches in church in a way that does not serve to edify or build up the body, should be silenced.... because “*God is a God of order and peace*” vs 33).

Conclusion

Dare I suggest, therefore, that to use this verse to impose a ban on all women, at all times, in all places to be silent in church, is not what Paul is intending. Nor is it the teaching of the Bible.

This makes further sense when we consider the final step we need to follow in our journey of interpretation.

Interpret a passage in the light of all other scripture. *Don't allow a passage to deny what we know to be true of God elsewhere in scripture.*

- This would contradict his own teaching elsewhere (Note that in 1 Cor 11:5,13 Paul allows women to pray and prophecy ie they are not silent!)
- Does this teaching mean that God says women may never exercise leadership? NO! Even in the early church, there were women in leadership roles whom Paul recognises as co-workers in Christ (who were clearly NOT silent in church!).

These included

Priscilla (Rom 16:3)

Phoebe, a deacon (Rom 16:1)

Philip's four daughters who were prophets (Acts 21:8-9)
Junia (Rom 16:7)

- Paul himself writes: **Galatians 3:28** "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord".

So judge for yourselves: Is the teaching of the Bible that women must forever be silenced and barred from leadership in the church?

Most certainly not!

Final comments

As we conclude this series, I hope that in our journey through passages in 1 Corinthians, you have seen something of the importance of following the basic steps of interpretation, especially when reading the epistles/letters. Let us be careful not to select isolated verses and use them to 'Bible bash' others, or insist they are saying something that the original author, let alone God, ever intended.

As I close, let us celebrate the gift of shared ministry (ordained and lay) in the life of our church, where men and women can minister together. In our life of worship together here at the Cathedral, let each one of us – whether man or woman, boy or girl – play our part and do all we can to build up and strengthen the church of God.

Additional notes:

Textual problems:

- *Vs 35 what about women who are unmarried or don't have believing husbands? (also note that in view of the fact that women were denied education, it is quite radical that Paul encourages them to discuss with their husbands at home, so they can learn and also avoid displaying their ignorance in public!)*
- *Vs 34 what Law is he referring to?*

- *The OT doesn't forbid women to speak*
- *Is he referring to a cultural norm?*
- *Is he referring to the rulings of the Talmud concerning women being quiet in the synagogue?*
- *Was it a law aimed at curbing the cultic excesses of women transferred to Christian worship?*

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