

“The Women should keep Silence in the Churches!” (1 Cor. 14:34)

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So what does Paul mean exactly and why is this command given? These two questions shall concern us here briefly.¹

What does Paul mean?

In the fourth century of the early church there was a vigorous debate on this question, particularly whether or not women may contribute in the singing. The churches eventually banned women from this activity and it was only from the time of the Reformation, which introduced the phenomenon of *congregational* singing in unison, that women were permitted to participate.²

In order to understand the apostle Paul rightly, let us look at his words in context. I quote 1 Cor. 14:26-40 from the ESV:

(26) What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn³, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation⁴. Let all things be done for building up. (27) If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. (28) But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.

(29) Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. (30) If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first 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 prophets. (33) For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

As in all the churches of the saints,⁵ (34) the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. (35) If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

(36) Or was it from you⁶ that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? (37) If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. (38) If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. (39) So, my brothers, earnestly desire⁷ to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. (40) But all things should be done decently and in order.

The reader will see that I have emphasised three phrases which all give a command of silence. Paul is seeking to provide order in the worship services in Corinth, which seem to have gotten quite out of hand due to jealousy for certain spiritual gifts. In chapter 12 Paul had described the local church as the *body* of Christ. Each member is a separate limb with a separate function and a separate gift. These gifts work together to form a body. In no uncertain terms Paul emphasises that no one gift should dominate and that it was and is not the intention that everybody should have the *same* gift. There were some in the congregation who had received the special gift of speaking in foreign languages (tongues), a gift which was provided by the laying on of the hands of an apostle (cf. Acts 8:18-19, cf. 19:6). Scripture indicates that such tongue speaking was

1 Those desiring a more in-depth discussion of some of the questions broached here may consult my commentary: *1 Corinthians: Creating Order in a New Urban Church* (Western Australia: Pro Ecclesia, 2017).

2 On the early church see J. Quasten, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (transl. by B. Ramsey from the 2nd German edition of 1973 [Washington: National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983]) pp.77-87. Those protestant churches that also engaged solo singing and choirs (e.g. Lutherans) forbade the participation of women in these things, permitting them only to engage in the congregational singing. Bach's church cantata's, for example, never had female soloists or even females in the choirs.

3 Paul literally refers to a 'psalm', but the word does not have to be restricted to the 150 psalms in the Bible.

4 With this word Paul means what we would call a *translation* of the 'tongue'.

5 Some interpreters attach 14:33b to 14:33a (cf. NKJV, NIV). In that case Paul would be saying that God is a God of peace and not of disorder just as in all the congregations of the saints. But would anyone have doubted that? The additional phrase is in this case quite meaningless. It fits much better with the following command and is therefore treated this way by far and away the most commentators, who attach 14:33b to 14:34 (cf. ESV).

6 The "you" is masculine here and addressed to the whole congregation, not just women.

7 This phrase can also be translated 'esteem prophecy highly', which makes more sense given that in chapter 12 Paul has argued that each member of the body has his own gift and it was never the intention that all the members should have the same gifts.

used in prayer, but that not everyone with this ability was able to understand what he was saying. There were others with the gift or ability to translate these languages, the ‘interpreters’. Paul argues that a maximum of three people should lead in prayer in a foreign language, and then only if there is a translator. If there is no translator, the budding tongue-speaker *must keep silent*.

Similarly, among those gifted with prophecy, a maximum of three prophets may speak during a service. If a prophet receives a revelation while another prophet is speaking, the first prophet *must keep silent*. The prophets, all of them, must speak one by one. When Paul says “you can all prophesy” he is of course at that point speaking to the group of people who have been given the gift of prophecy. When, however, he continues “... so that all may learn and all be encouraged” he is surely referring to the whole congregation.

The first point to notice here is that Paul, having spoken about the need for tongue-speakers and prophets to be *silent* in certain circumstances, provides a blanket command of silence for women. There can be no question from the context that Paul expects women, even if they would have the gift of tongue-speaking or prophecy, to remain *silent* during the gathering of the church for worship.

Now a number of commentators have made a problem of this, arguing that this interpretation of Paul’s words, which is *on the surface* rather obvious, cannot possibly be correct. Did not Paul in chapter 11 already talk about women leading in prayer and prophesying?⁸ While this is true, a reflection upon Paul’s discussion there and his ordering of topics shows that this objection is not relevant. In the first place, Paul’s discussion of praying and prophesying in the first half of chapter 11 is not at all limited to public worship. In fact the matter of assembling together is not mentioned at all. Paul is concerned about prayer and prophesying wherever and whenever that occurs. In fact, all the examples of New Testament prophesying recorded in Acts occurred *outside* a worship service. Secondly, it is only *after* this discussion that Paul introduces the matter of assembling together. He says specifically in 11:17 “But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because *when you come together* it is not for the better but for the worse.” Paul then launches into a criticism of the way the Corinthians were conducting themselves at their weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper, which at that time was the essence of the afternoon service and observed as a meal. In chapters 12-14 he turns to the morning assemblies for worship as he discusses the question of spiritual gifts.

Before reflecting upon the reasons which Paul gives for the command that women be silent, it is perhaps interesting to reflect upon the question in what context women in Corinth may actually have been speaking in worship. Given that women in the society of the time *never* led in prayer or prophesied in the presence of men (women tended to offer sacrifice to the gods as a group apart from men), it is highly unlikely that this was happening in the Christian congregation of Corinth. Paul himself hints at what was going on when he specifically says in 14:35 “If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” The women were asking questions.

To understand better what was going on we need to go back to what Paul said with respect to the speaking of the prophets. The prophets are to speak one by one “so that all may learn and all be encouraged” (14:31b). The verb which Paul uses of “learning” here (μανθάνω) is related to the word used in Scripture for the ‘disciples’ (μαθηταί) of Jesus. It implies a process of *active* learning, that is, not just by listening to what is said, but by actively posing questions. In fact, this active learning process was quite common in the Jewish synagogues out of which the Christian churches arose. We see both Jesus and Paul making use of it when given the opportunity of speaking at synagogue worship (cf. Mark 6:2-4; Luke 4:22; John 6:25-59; Acts 13:45-46; 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8). What Paul is saying here is that the *women* ought not to be asking such questions during worship. They may ask “their men” at home. The ESV translates ‘husbands’ at this point, but it is better to translate Paul literally here. He speaks of “their men”, given that the fact that women at this time always needed a designated male as their legal representative. For married women that was of course their husband, but for unmarried women or widows, this was usually some other extended family member.

It should be clear that, for Paul, this command for women to be silent is no small matter. In no uncertain terms, the apostle declares *even the asking of questions in public worship* to be ‘shameful’. This brings us to our second question ...

8 When Scripture speaks of ‘praying’, the activity envisaged is *always* speaking a prayer out loud.

Why is this command given?

The quick and easy answer is – as Paul states – because “the Law says” so (14:34). There is, however, no specific law which Paul can be referring to. We tend to forget that Paul uses the term “Law” to refer to the whole of God’s revelation in the Old Testament. Already in 14:21 he had quoted Isaiah as “the Law”. Given that here, no specific text is referred to, Paul must surely be thinking of general principles from God’s written revelation.⁹ We are thankfully not left to our own musings on such principles, however, for Paul in a letter, written probably only a few months later,¹⁰ comes back to the question of the silence of women. I am of course referring to 1 Timothy 2:11-15, where Paul requires that women “learn in silence with all submissiveness” (v.11). The same verb for ‘learning’ is used here as in 1 Cor. 14:31b, namely a learning which normally implies asking questions. While this may be fine for the men, Paul enjoins women to “learn in silence”, that is, without using questions in public to further their understanding. This context also clarifies Paul’s use of the word ‘all’ in the phrase “all submissiveness”. Men, too, need to be submissive to their teachers. But women are commanded to use “all submissiveness”, in other words, by remaining silent instead of asking questions. In 1 Timothy too Paul presupposes that women do not speak in the worship services. In chapter two he calls upon the men to lift up holy hands in prayer, while he summons the women to adorn themselves modestly (2:8-10). The presupposition is that women do not lead in prayer.

In 1 Timothy Paul also makes more explicit what he means by his reference to “the Law”. He refers to the fact that Adam was created first and that the nature of Eve’s sin in paradise was different to that of Adam. In this way, the silence of women in worship testifies both to their godly submission to God’s created order and to a godly humility as they remember that it was Eve – the first woman – who was deceived by the devil.

Final musings

My word limit is almost up, but there is still a little space for a couple of musings. Traditional Reformed worship does not include posing questions after or during a sermon. The only example of this I’ve experienced was by way of a heckler from off the street during a service in Armadale. It is particularly the size of most Reformed churches that make such question and answer sessions practically unworkable. We leave such to public lectures or Bible study groups. This, however, is not to say that given a very small congregation it ought not to be possible to have some time for sermon clarification during worship. We ought, however, in such a situation not to let the dominant trends in our own culture override the specific command of Scripture that in such a context women remain *silent*.

9 Some interpreters think that Paul by ‘the law’ in 1 Cor. 14 refers to Gen. 3:16 (“your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you”), which is possible. Others reject this suggestion on the basis of the idea that Gen. 3:16 is part of God’s curse. There are good reasons, however, for accepting the idea that Gen. 3:16b says something positive about the man / woman relationship (see e.g. S. T. Foh, *Women & the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* [USA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979] pp.66-69). Nevertheless, the reasons given in 1 Tim. 2:11-15 lie closer to hand.

10 1 Corinthians was written in the Spring (March/April) of AD 55. 1 Timothy was probably written in the Summer of the same year. See J. van Bruggen, *Paulus: Pionier voor de Messias van Israël* (Kampen: Kok, 2001) pp.266-67.