

An Examination of Apostle Paul’s Instruction in 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 on the Role of Women in Churches

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Abstract

The meaning and application of 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 on the role of women in churches has posed a great hermeneutical challenge to Bible scholars. For instance, the statement in verse 34, “women should remain silent in the churches,” has elicited different interpretations. To some, Paul offered a timeless rule forbidding every kind of speech by women, while others see it as a contextual issue limited only to the Corinthian churches. Therefore, a balanced biblical interpretation is necessary to clarify Paul’s instruction regarding the involvement of women in church ministry. This paper explores whether 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 hinders women from teaching, speaking, or leading in the church. To achieve this, the study, first, analyzes critical issues raised by the two opposing camps on the matter. Second, the research employs the grammatical-historical approach to ascertain the author’s meaning in the biblical text. The article argues that 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 does not summarily forbid every kind of speech by women in the church. Instead, it addresses the kind of speech by women that was considered disruptive to order during worship, and disrespectful to their husbands and the church leadership, and shameful within the Greco-Roman cultural norms.

Keywords: Women, Silent, Shameful, Submit, Churches, Leadership, Church Ministry, Worship

Introduction

The issue of women involvement in church ministry and leadership has been a subject of controversy for a long time among scholars and in ecclesiological circles. It remains a significant subject due to the modern egalitarian sensibilities. Unsurprisingly, today, some men believers are

uncomfortable having women exercising authority over them in church¹ either through teaching, being ordained into pastoral ministry, or being appointed as leaders over men and women. Those who believe that women should not teach or lead in church mostly base their arguments on Scriptures like 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:9–15. This article demonstrates that the instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 were not forbidding every kind of speech by women in the church. Instead, it addressed the kind of speeches by women that were considered disruptive to order during worship, disrespectful to their husbands and the church leadership, and shameful within the norms of the Greco-Roman culture. Therefore, the passage should not be interpreted literally as forbidding every speaking by women in the church or to bar them from active involvement in church ministry; because doing so will be disregarding the principles of biblical interpretation and application. Procedurally, following this introduction is a review of some literature related to this research, then an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 in its context. This is then followed by a summary of the findings, application, and conclusion.

The researcher employed the grammatico-historical method in interpreting the biblical text. This approach “refers to studying the biblical text in its original historical context, and seeking the meaning its author(s) most likely intended for its original audience(s) based on the grammar and syntax.”² It involves analysis of the biblical text and translating it correctly.³

Literature Review

In this section, we explore the various views on the role of women in churches according to 1 Corinthians 14:33–35. The section begins by looking at the literal interpretation- that the biblical passage instructs women to remain silent in churches. This is then followed by an exploration of the views of those who believe that the passage does not prohibit women from speaking, teaching, or leading in the church. But first, we will consider the immediate context of the passage.

¹Referring to a local congregation.

² Craig L. Blomberg et al, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012), 27.

³ Porter, Stovell, and Blomberg, 37.

Literary Context

1 Corinthians 14:33–35 occurs within the immediate context of 14:26–40, where Paul emphasizes orderly worship whenever the believers at Corinth gathered. His focus in this chapter is on the gifts of speaking in tongues and prophecy. The discourse begins in chapter 12 and concludes at the end of chapter 14. So, 1 Corinthians 12:1—14:40 is the larger literary context. He highlights various gifts given by the Holy Spirit to believers as he determines for the common good. Hence, believers should not boast or compete in the exercise of spiritual gifts because they are members of the same body of Christ. Love, order, and edification of all in attendance should be the ultimate motivation.

The First View: Women Should not Speak, Teach or Lead in Church

Charles, Edward Thomas, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians

Edward's interpretation of verses 33b–35 is that "In 11:5 the apostle permits the women to pray and prophesy in the assembly under certain restrictions. The discussion of the gifts of tongues seems to have led him to withdraw even that limited permission, so women must keep silence in the assemblies."⁴ As Edward asserts, if Paul were withdrawing the permission he had earlier given to women, he would have explicitly stated so before or after verses 33b–35, but he did not. Therefore, Edward's opinion may not be accurate.

Grosheide, F. W., Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians

While commenting on verses 33b–35, Grosheide argues that "Paul's aim has been to restrict prophecy in its use and in accordance with that, women should not prophesy at all in the services. Women are allowed to prophesy but not when the congregation officially meets (cf chapter 11)."⁵ However, in chapter 11, Paul does not address the issue of prophecy outside regular worship services. Further, Grosheide sees the reason for forbidding women from speaking or asking questions in church as "the shamefulness of Corinthian practices." Additionally, he argues that "everybody will agree that it is unbecoming for a woman to speak in

⁴ Edward Thomas Charles, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, Minneapolis, MN, 1979), 381.

⁵ F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1980), 341.

a public meeting of the church.”⁶ This sweeping assumption is erroneous because the idea of shame varies from one culture to another.

Morris, Leon, The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians

Morris’ interpretation of verses 33b–35 forbids women from taking a leading role in the congregations. It is unclear how he arrives at this interpretation because these verses do not address women’s leadership; what is prohibited is some form of speech. He argues, “Christian women ought not to be ‘forward,’ they should not seek needlessly to flout the accepted ideas of the day. For women to take on themselves the role of instructors would have been to discredit Christianity in the eyes of most people.”⁷ It may have been true in light of the belief in the superiority of men that existed in the Greco-Roman society at that time.⁸

In summary, these views interpret 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 as withdrawing the permission granted to women to pray and prophesy in the church in chapter 11. They also see it as improper for a woman to speak during a worship service.

The Second View: Women Can Speak, Teach or Lead in Church

Thorpe, Kirsty, Janet Wootton, and Ian Jones, Women & Ordination in the Christian Churches

After examining the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, the authors argue, “Though Jesus chose twelve men to be his inner core of disciples; he is not shown to have had any tendency to see women as different to men. In many places, he makes it clear that gender is irrelevant to the concerns of the kingdom of God.”⁹ I concur with this conclusion because we see Jesus, for example, conversing with a Samaritan woman in the gospel according to John chapter 4, after which the woman went off to tell her people what Jesus had told her. As a result, many of them believed. Additionally, “at Pentecost, the Spirit is poured out on both men and women, fulfilling the prophecy of Joel, and Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts makes no suggestion that these are

⁶ Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 343.

⁷ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 201.

⁸ James S Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 82, <http://qut.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=2027763>.

⁹ Kirsty Thorpe, Janet Wootton, and Ian Jones, *Women and Ordination in the Christian Churches: International Perspectives*, T & T Clark Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 77, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=344138&site=ehost-live>.

not given as the Spirit wills to both men and women.”¹⁰ This is very profound, noting that 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 falls within the context of Paul’s discourse on spiritual gifts, which began in chapter 12. And since the gifts are given without gender discrimination as the Holy Spirit determines, it will be contradictory to expect women who have received such gifts to be silent and not utilize them in church.

Pelser, G.M.M., Women & Ecclesiastical Ministries in Paul

Commenting on 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35, Pelser sees the command to silence as being in direct contradiction to 11:5¹¹ and argues, “Paul thoroughly acknowledged and never discouraged the fact that women were not excluded from the gift of the Spirit neither during public worship nor with regard to ministry in the church.”¹² This is true as seen in 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul acknowledged that women could pray or prophesy as long as their heads were covered or they had long hair, and in 14:31 where women believers are included in the word ‘all.’ He concludes by saying that Paul has not presented any basis upon which a Christian woman can be excluded from any type of service or ministry in the church.¹³ The exegesis section will further examine this thought.

Gilbert, George H., Women in Public Worship in the Churches of Paul

George H. Gilbert, in his article on *Women in Public Worship in the Churches of Paul*, opines that Paul has not contradicted himself, and he should not be accused of excluding women from participating in all or any of the forms of public worship. He writes, “All believers, without distinction of sex, could come into the gatherings for worship and bring a psalm, or a teaching, or a revelation, or a tongue, or an interpretation (1 Cor 14:26).”¹⁴ Arguably, Paul has not contradicted himself; what is constant in his instructions is the issue of wives submitting to their husbands even during worship, ensuring that order is maintained and everyone is edified.

¹⁰ Thorpe, Wootton, and Jones, 77–78.

¹¹ G.M.M. Pelser, “Women and Ecclesiastical Ministries in Paul,” *Neotestamentica* 10 (1976): 95.

¹² Pelser, 106.

¹³ Pelser, 106–7.

¹⁴ George H. Gilbert, “Women in Public Worship in the Churches of Paul,” *The Biblical World* 2, no. 1 (1893): 47.

Talbert, Charles H., Reading Corinthians

For Talbert, verses 34–35 is “a Corinthian assertion followed by Paul’s response in verse 36 because they reflect the general cultural values and also because the position taken in verse 34–35 runs counter to that taken by Paul elsewhere: Gal 3:27–28, 1 Cor 11:5, 11:12.”¹⁵ Even though 14:34–35 seems to run counter Paul’s earlier instruction, it may not be correct to view the verses as a Corinthian assertion because Paul could have rendered it like in Acts 17:28 or Titus 1:12, or possibly put it in quotation marks like in 1 Corinthians 10:23.

Garland, David E., 1 Corinthians

Garland sees verses 34–35 as “instructions which apply to how wives are to relate to their husbands in the church’s public assemblies.”¹⁶ This can be partly true because the instructions were directed to wives and women in general and how they were to conduct themselves during worship services. Concerning the phrase αἰσχρὸν γάρ ἐστιν γυναικὶ λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ (for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church) in verse 35, Garland argues, “shame, in this context, pertains to what society views as inappropriate behavior and is relative to a given culture.”¹⁷ Daniel Smith affirms this argument on shame by Garland that the Greco-Roman culture of that time sought to gain honor and avoid shame, especially in public.¹⁸

In summary, the views above argue that Paul has not denied that women have received spiritual gifts. Neither has he argued for their exclusion from participating in any form of worship in church. Instead, the instructions deal with how wives should relate to their husbands in the church and the required sensitivity to the prevailing Greco-Roman culture.

Historical and Socio-Cultural Context

Corinth was a prominent capital of the Roman province of Achaia.¹⁹ Greeks originally inhabited it, but Romans came in later from different places with their laws, culture, and religion.²⁰ Vices

¹⁵ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, Reading the New Testament Series (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 91–92.

¹⁶ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003), 663.

¹⁷ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 668.

¹⁸ Daniel Lynwood Smith, *Into the World of the New Testament: Greco-Roman and Jewish Texts and Contexts* (New York: T&T Clark, 2015), 154.

¹⁹ Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 13.

²⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1987), 2.

were prominent there, especially sexual immorality.²¹ Corinth was also a major religious city with about 26 sacred places dedicated to the various deities (cf. 1 Cor 8:5).²² The church in Corinth was founded in approximately AD 52 when Paul visited the city (Acts 18).²³ Paul wrote the epistle of 1 Corinthians in AD 53 or 54 from Ephesus.²⁴ Paul's primary objective in writing the letter was to address some unbiblical conduct among the believers at Corinth, which threatened the church's unity.²⁵

Concerning the family structure, Jeffers remarks that the male head had full control of the Roman household.²⁶ As the leader, he is the primary decision-maker of the family. Sometimes women participated and held offices alongside men in newer cults but were later removed as the cult sought prominence from society.²⁷ Thus, it was not a cultural norm for women to occupy leadership positions in the Greco-Roman.

Women in the Greco-Roman Culture and the New Testament

It is instructive that both Greeks and Romans believed in "the inherent superiority of men."²⁸ This practice means that the Greco-Roman society was highly patriarchal. In comparison to the Greco-Roman family, members of Christian congregations were involved in decision-making by their leaders.²⁹ This means that decision-making was not exclusively for the leaders or the male believers. However, Jeffers acknowledges, "In some contexts, including the Jewish religious context, it was considered inappropriate for women to interrupt a speaker with questions."³⁰ This point directly relates to the instruction by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:35, where he instructs women who may have questions to ask their men at home rather than disrupt the worship with questions in church.

²¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* 2.

²² Fee, 3.

²³ Clinton E. Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002), 106–7.

²⁴ Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 13.

²⁵ Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 7 (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 22–23.

²⁶ Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 238.

²⁷ Jeffers, 251.

²⁸ Jeffers, 82.

²⁹ Jeffers, 84.

³⁰ Jeffers, 252.

Daniel Smith also observes that the Mediterranean culture valued honor in public and tried to avoid shame.³¹ This aspect of the Mediterranean culture at that time explains the usage of the word αἰσχρός (shameful) in 14:35 and why Paul said that it was disgraceful for a woman to speak in church. This does not mean that Paul was a prisoner of culture but that he was cognizant of the socio-cultural realities of Corinth. Yet, he advised that it was proper for them to seek clarifications from their men at home (possibly when they are alone) to avoid any instance of public embarrassment through the questions and interruptions.

Concerning education, Jeffers argues, “Greco-Roman culture regarded women (with notable exceptions) as incapable of the level of intellectual ability achieved by men. It allotted women the duty of childbearing and child-rearing.”³² As a result of this demeaning attitude, most girls in the upper classes did not proceed with education after attaining middle teenage years because they were married off through arranged marriages.³³ Thus, by implication, men were more educated than women. Hence, even in the church gathering, women would be more prone to ask questions with a desire to learn more. This reality explains why it was the women, not the men, whom Paul addresses. The following section deals with the exegesis of the Greek text (1 Cor 14:33–35).³⁴

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14:33–35

Greek Text: 33 οὐ γάρ ἐστιν ἀκαταστασίας ὁ θεὸς ἀλλὰ εἰρήνης. Ὡς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῶν ἁγίων.

Translation: For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints³⁵

In verse 33a, the statement, οὐ γάρ ἐστιν ἀκαταστασίας ὁ θεὸς ἀλλὰ εἰρήνης (for God is not a God of disorder but of peace)’ is the basis of Paul’s argument in this passage. It is also completion and an explanation of verse 32 because the explanatory coordinating conjunction γάρ “indicates a causal relation between two statements, whereby the second statement gives a reason for or explains the first.”³⁶ God, being the God of order and the one who gives the gift of prophecy, could not have intended the gift to bring confusion during worship. This nature of God

³¹ Smith, *Into the World of the New Testament*, 154.

³² Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 250.

³³ Jeffers, 256.

³⁴ Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, Fifth Revised edition, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2018).

³⁵ This and the rest of the verses are my translations.

³⁶ Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1990), 238.

as a God of peace is also evident in Judges 6:24, Romans 15:33; 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:11, Philippians 4:9, and Hebrews 13:20.

Verse 33b, Ὡς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῶν ἁγίων (As in all the churches of the saints), is the basis on which Paul anchors his next instruction. The dative of association πάσαις (all) refers to all the churches of saints outside Corinth at that time. Paul desired that the Corinthian churches adopt the orderly practices upheld by other congregations. Witherington is of the same idea that “Paul is repeating what was a general rule in all early Christian congregations.”³⁷ Arguably, this is true because, in verse 36, Paul challenges the apparent pride among the Corinthians in behaving as an exclusive church. Commentators have differed on whether verses 34–35 were originally written by Paul or not. However, all the existing manuscripts have these verses,³⁸ and their internal arguments are Pauline in character.³⁹

In verse 34, while still seeking to maintain order during worship, Paul briefly shifts his focus to the women in the Corinthian house churches. He tells them, αἱ γυναῖκες ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σιγάτωσαν, οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτρέπεται αὐταῖς λαλεῖν· ἀλλὰ ὑποτασσέσθωσαν, καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει. (the women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but they should submit, just as the law also says). The phrase, αἱ γυναῖκες (the women), refers to women in a general sense (including married women, unmarried women, and widows). The phrase ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις (in the churches) in this case was referring to the house churches at Corinth.⁴⁰ The present imperative σιγάτωσαν (should be silent) expresses a prohibition. It forbids an action (speaking) that is already in progress, meaning that the women were already engaging in some talk that disrupted the order of worship. The instruction is also applied to the tongue speakers in verse 28, where there is no interpreter, and to prophets in verse 30, where a revelation came to a seated person.

This verb σιγάτωσαν is derived from σιγάω meaning “to keep silence, hold one’s peace, to be kept in silence or be concealed.”⁴¹ Similarly, according to the Exegetical Dictionary of the

³⁷ Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans [u.a.], 1995), 287.

³⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1994), 279.

³⁹ Raymond F. Collins and Daniel J. Harrington, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 7 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1999), 516.

⁴⁰ M. Bruce Button and Fika J Van Rensburg, “The ‘House Churches’ in Corinth,” *Neotestamentica* 37, no. 1 (2003): 1.

⁴¹ “Bible Search and Study Tools - Blue Letter Bible,” accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/>.

New Testament (EDNT), σιγάω means “keep silent or still, including in the sense of hold one’s tongue or say nothing to anyone (Luke 9:36). It can also refer to the end of a speech: stop speaking, though in the New Testament only in the present imperative in 1 Cor 14:30.”⁴² Therefore, the word has been used in this verse to stop speech by women, which was deemed disruptive in the church.

Witherington argues that the reason why Paul gave this instruction was that “During the time of the weighing of prophecies, some women, probably married women, who themselves may have been prophetesses and thus entitled to weigh what was said, were asking questions, perhaps inappropriate questions and the worship service was being disrupted.”⁴³ Witherington makes a valid point, though limiting the instruction to married women who were prophetesses leaves out both married and unmarried women who may not have been prophetesses and were also engaging in disruptive and disrespectful speaking in the churches at Corinth.

Similarly, David Garland remarks, “The problem concerns how wives were to comport themselves in the public sphere in the context of examining prophecies and has nothing to do with the public ministry of women. Paul does not contradict what he says in 11:5 but imposes silence on wives in matters other than praying and prophesying.”⁴⁴ Indeed, these instructions were not about the public ministry of women because having acknowledged in chapter 11 and even 14:27 and 31 that women could pray, prophesy and speak in tongues in church, Paul could not again say that their voice should not be heard at all. Garland clarifies that the command for women to be silent “does not permanently and absolutely enjoin women’s silence in every circumstance, requiring them to learn only at home. ‘All’ are to learn in the assembly (14:31). They are asked to hold their speech for the moment to avoid any embarrassment.”⁴⁵ These arguments are valid because Paul desired that the exercise of gifts would strengthen and edify the whole church (verse 26).

Robertson and Plummer hold a different opinion. According to them,

The women are to keep silent in public services. They would join in the amen (v.16) but otherwise not be heard. They had been claiming equality with men in matters of the veil by discarding this mark of

⁴² Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1990), 242.

⁴³ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 287.

⁴⁴ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 668–69.

⁴⁵ Garland, 672.

subjection in church, and apparently they had also been attempting to preach, or at any rate had been asking questions during service.⁴⁶

They imply that women were not to speak in the church except to say an ‘amen’ after prayers. However, if that were the case, it would erroneously suggest that women were not among the tongue speakers or prophets that Paul addresses in this chapter.

On his part, Craig Blomberg argues that taking verses 34–35 as absolute commands silencing women in every way is implausible because that would imply that Paul disapproved of women praying or prophesying publicly in 11:5. Without contextual support, it would also suggest that chapters 11 and 14 have different kinds of Christian assemblies in view. Additionally, it would also assume that Paul was not inspired when writing these passages, or he could not remember what he had just written, so he contradicted himself.⁴⁷ According to Blomberg, “The best perspective is to take Paul’s commands as prohibiting women from participating in the final church decisions about the legitimacy of any given prophecy.”⁴⁸ He goes on to explain, “An authoritative evaluation of prophecy would ultimately have been the responsibility of the church leadership (what Paul elsewhere calls elders or overseers), who, at least in the first century, seems to have been exclusively male.”⁴⁹ This argument has some merits considering that Paul had just addressed the gift of prophecy and its evaluation in verses 29–32. Also, most of the leaders in most churches were men, considering Paul’s instructions in 1 Timothy 3:1–12 and Titus 1:5–9. However, a few women were in frontline church leadership (Rom 16:1–2, Acts 18:26, Col 4:15, and 1 Tim 3:11).

The phrase, οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτρέπεται αὐταῖς λαλεῖν (for they are not permitted to speak) is part of the explanation of why women were to be silent in the churches. The adverb, οὐ (not), which modifies the verb ἐπιτρέπεται is an objective negation which implies that permission is denied. The fact that this denial of permission for them to speak is in the passive voice (οὐ ἐπιτρέπεται- not permitted) rather active voice implies that the denial of permission is not originating from Paul; he was simply stating a norm. What the women were not permitted to do was λαλεῖν (to speak). According to Edward Thomas, “The word ἐπιτρέπεται [it is permitted, in verse 34]

⁴⁶ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd, 1983), 324.

⁴⁷ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 280.

⁴⁸ Blomberg, 281.

⁴⁹ Blomberg, 281.

glances at the permission given in 11:5, which is now withdrawn, and as a reason for withdrawing it the apostle adds that it is not ‘usually permitted’ in the churches.”⁵⁰ This line of thought is inaccurate because the word ἐπιτρέπω (to permit) is not used in 11:5, also 11:5 is explicitly addressing praying and prophesying. But in 14:34–35 what is not allowed is “speaking” which is not explicitly defined as to what kind of speech it was. If indeed prophecy and praying were not usually permitted in the churches, then Paul would not have dealt with the matter in the first place.

The clause ἀλλὰ ὑποτασσέσθωσαν, καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει (but they should submit, just as the law also says) is a reinforcement to the denial of permission for women to speak in the churches. The adversative coordinating conjunction ἀλλὰ (but) introduces what is expected of the women: to submit. The word ὑποτασσέσθωσαν, here basically means to subject oneself or to submit voluntarily.⁵¹ In verse 34, Paul instructs the women to submit to the church leadership and to their husbands at home and in church. Robertson and Plummer comment, “So far from their having dominion over men, ‘Let them be in subjection even as also the Law saith.’ The reference is to the primeval command, Gen 3:16, comp Eph 5:22.”⁵² On the issue of women submitting, Garland asserts that just as slaves are not called to obey every master, women are not subject to every man in the church but only to their husbands (see Eph 5:22–24; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet 3:1–6).⁵³ The attitude of submission in a general sense is expected among all believers, whether male or female, as seen in Ephesians 5:21, 1 Corinthians 16:16, 1 Peter 2:13, and Romans 13:1. Since the central issue in these verses is about order in worship, the submission here can also apply to church leadership. Jesus Christ himself, who is the head of the church, is the model of submission, as we see him submitting to the Father’s will and plan in Matthew 26:39, John 6:38, 1 Corinthians 15:28, and Philippians 2:5–8.

The clause, καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει, (just as also the law says), is an assertion that the tradition of women submitting is also mentioned in the law. However, it is essential to clarify that women submitting to their husbands is not explicit in the Old Testament Law. Possibly Paul

⁵⁰ Edward Thomas Charles, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 382.

⁵¹ Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey W. (Geoffrey William) Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VIII (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1972), 40.

⁵² Robertson and Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 325.

⁵³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 667–68.

was alluding to Genesis 3:16, where God pronounced that the woman's desire shall be for her husband and he (the husband) will rule over her.

In verse 35, Paul teaches, εἰ δέ τι μαθεῖν θέλουσιν, ἐν οἴκῳ τοὺς ἰδίους ἄνδρας ἐπερωτάτωσαν, αἰσχρὸν γάρ ἐστιν γυναικὶ λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ. (And if they want to enquire anything, let them ask their own men at home because it is shameful for a woman to speak in church). The infinitive of purpose μαθεῖν (to enquire), implies that the enquiries made by the women during worship were for learning. Women would have possibly interrupted worship services to seek clarification on some things. Again, this may have been caused by their lower education level, as earlier seen in the socio-historical background.⁵⁴ I take the phrase ἰδίους ἄνδρας to mean 'their own men,' which includes husbands (for the married women), and other male adults in the household who were present during the worship service. The phrase, ἐν οἴκῳ,⁵⁵ 'at home' indicates the place where women were allowed to raise their questions, in contrast to ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ,⁵⁶ 'in church,' where they were not permitted to speak.

Concerning the first part of this verse: "And if they want to enquire anything, let them ask their own men at home," Keener views it from a societal perspective and says, "Although some philosophic schools included women disciples, most schools, whether Jewish or Gentile did not, and society expected men rather than women to absorb and question public lectures."⁵⁷ Furthermore, Keener argues, "Many hearers resented questions considered rude, inappropriate, or unlearned, which risked slowing other learners down and women were more apt to ask unlearned questions because most of them did not proceed with education beyond their mid-teens."⁵⁸

The last part of verse 35 is an additional explanation as to why women were to be silent in the church: αἰσχρὸν γάρ ἐστιν γυναικὶ λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ (because it is shameful for a woman to speak in church). The adjective αἰσχρὸν (shameful) used together with the verb to be ἐστιν (is, taken here as a customary present because shame was a culturally defined issue. The honor-

⁵⁴ Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 256.

⁵⁵ Dative of place

⁵⁶ Dative of sphere

⁵⁷ Craig S Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 119, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511802980>.

⁵⁸ Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, 119.

shame issue was widely held in the church and the larger Corinthian society.⁵⁹ Paul is sensitive to these cultural norms and how they affect the Christian congregations.

Commenting on this verse, Origen takes an extreme position, “It is shameful for a woman to speak in church, whatever she might say, even if she should speak marvelous and holy words.”⁶⁰ According to Jorunn Okland, “By using shame as an argument against women’s speech in the ekklesia (church), Paul seems to place his reflections on the ekklesia into some broader discourse with pre-defined notions about what is shameful and what is not.”⁶¹ This position is balanced because the idea of shame finds meaning within its historical, literary, and socio-cultural context.

In verses 36–38, Paul challenges the apparent pride of the Corinthians. He reminds them that the word of God did not originate from them, neither did it come only to them. They were expected to take his instructions seriously, as a command from the Lord. He concludes the discourse in verses 39–40 by emphasizing that each gift is important but that everything in the churches should be done in an orderly manner.

Summary

The Pauline instruction “women should remain silent in the churches” ought to be understood within the Corinthian situation and the larger Greco-Roman context. The disorderly nature of the worship services regarding the practice of spiritual gifts prompted Paul to address the matter. He reminds his readers that God is a God of order and peace. Hence the Corinthians needed to be orderly, just like all the congregations of the saints. Apparently, some women in the Corinthian churches were engaging in some disruptive and disrespectful talk contrary to the expectation of them showing submission to their husbands and the church leaders. That talk was also shameful within the larger Greco-Roman culture of that time. That’s why Paul instructed the women who were engaging in such talk to be silent in church. However, if they had any enquiries to make, they do so at home to avoid disrupting the order during worship or embarrassing their husbands and the church leaders in public. Therefore, the application of this passage today needs to consider the ancient socio-cultural factors.

⁵⁹ Jeffers, 252.

⁶⁰ Judith L. Kovacs, ed., *1 Corinthians: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, The Church’s Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2005), 240.

⁶¹ Jorunn Økland, *Women in Their Place: Paul and the Corinthian Discourse of Gender and Sanctuary Space*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament 269 (London ; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 202.

Some principles can be derived from the instructions in 1 Cor 14:33–35 to apply contextually in our churches today. First, all believers (men and women) should endeavor to uphold order and peace during worship by not engaging in disruptive or disrespectful speech. Second, women should submit to their husbands both at home and in church and the male (and female) church leaders. The passage should not be used to hinder women from speaking in churches. Rather,

We need to think about what ways of speaking in public would suggest that a wife is not submissive. Generally, this would involve speaking in a way that humiliates her husband or other men.... it is possible for a woman to express her views, even when she differs with others, without humiliating her husband. Effective African women have demonstrated this. A woman who bullies men with her strong opinions rapidly loses her audience, while a woman who instructs with a humble spirit affects the lives of many.⁶²

Conclusion

God is a God of peace and order. All male and female believers should always reflect this character whenever they gather for worship and exercise their spiritual gifts. Women should always submit to their husbands both at home and in church and avoid engaging in any speech that disrupts order in worship or shows a lack of submission to their husbands and church leaders. The Holy Spirit equally gifts women, and they have a right to exercise their gifts in the church, even in the presence of men, as long as they do so in an orderly and submissive manner. What is considered shameful in the church depends on the norms of a particular church and society. Therefore, these verses do not give a basis to bar women from any church ministry for which God has called, gifted, and anointed them through the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the passage should not be used as a tool to silence women in the church because such a move would amount to a misinterpretation of the passage.

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⁶² Tokunboh Adeyemo et al., eds., *Africa Bible Commentary*, Second edition (Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers, 2010), 1420.

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