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Q&A#69 1 Corinthians 14 and Women's Silence in Church

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Today's question: "I have a friend who is from a non-religious background who is interested in Christianity and is reading the bible for the first time. She asked me to explain 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35. "As in all the churches of the saints, 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. 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." She said, "I don't know how to make sense of that." I'm also curious (and unsure) about that passage as "keep silent", or it being "shameful for a women to speak in church" and needing to only ask questions of their own husbands goes far beyond men only as elders, teaching or having authority. As I type this I wonder if I should only ask my own husband about this. ;) We have five daughters, three of them are young adults now, believers with a high view of scripture, and they also wonder about this verse. We've had a lot of discussions about this in our home, and we are curious about your views."

I mention Kirk MacGregor's article as a reading of these verses (a reading I disagree with): <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/priscilla-papers/1-corinthians-1433b-38-pauline-quotation-refutation-device>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, I have a friend who is from a non-religious background who is interested in Christianity and is reading the Bible for the first time. She asked me to explain 1 Corinthians 14, 33b-35.

As in all the churches of the saints, 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. 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. She said, I don't know how to make sense of that.

I'm also curious and unsure about that passage, as keep silent, or it being shameful for a woman to speak in church, and needing to only ask questions of their own husbands, goes far beyond men only as elders, teaching, or having authority. As I type this, I wonder if I should only ask my own husband about this. We have five daughters, three of them are young adults now, believers with a high view of scripture, and they also wonder about this verse.

We've had a lot of discussions about this in our home, and we are curious about your views. There have been a lot of different readings of these verses, and they're not easy ones to read. It's not as if the problems in these verses and the difficulties in these verses are only felt by egalitarians as well.

There are difficulties and complexities in understanding how these texts relate to the broader context, how they fit in with other things that we find elsewhere in 1 Corinthians and within the broader body of scripture. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 11.5, we see references to women praying and prophesying in church. Now, that would seem to present problems with this verse, that here we have women told to be silent, and there we have women talking in some form within the life of the church.

So there do seem to be difficulties here. Some have tried to resolve this, for instance, by suggesting that 11.5 is referring to a more general context within the life of the church, and that this is referring to a particular context in gathered worship. That is possible, but unlikely, I think.

If you look through the rest of chapter 11, you see it referencing coming together to celebrate the Lord's Supper. And that, I think, would suggest that the whole of chapter 11 has that broader context in mind, that there is not a restriction here to this context outside of gathered worship, but rather that this is referring to prayer and prophecy that can occur on occasions within the context of gathered worship. From an egalitarian perspective, there has been a sense of the difficulty of this verse, and that has provoked a number of different solutions.

And these solutions do find certain degree of support in evidence beyond the conviction that there is a problem with this theologically. There are other factors that they can bring

forward. So, for instance, Philip Payne, who's one of the better-known egalitarian writers, argues that this is a non-Pauline interpolation.

This is a set of verses that have been put into its context that aren't actually Pauline, but come from a later hand. Now, I think this view has not gained much support for good reason. I think it's a view that struggles to account for the theological pressures of this verse by presenting a far more extensive theory, a far more elaborate theory than is actually needed.

There are many easier ways of explaining the fact that we find these verses out of place in some versions. And if this were a non-Pauline interpolation, it would be a very early one. And that, again, raises significant questions.

These are verses that we find referenced very early on within the life of the Church. And we also see that if we trace things back, we're talking about a very early date that this would be an interpolation. And also, if we were going to suggest that there were some sort of interpolation here, we could explain some of the supposedly non-Pauline features by saying that Paul is referencing a more general tradition that pre-exists him.

And we see his reference to the more general practice of the churches. That would suggest that there's a possibility he's referring to a tradition that is known more broadly. And in that sense, we should not be surprised to find elements of non-Pauline language, things like that.

But I don't think that is needed as an explanation. Others have argued, and more recently, Kirk MacGregor and Lucy Peppiot has presented this in detail, arguing from chapters 11 to 14 of 1 Corinthians, that these are Corinthian quotations that Paul is refuting. And that's not a crazy view.

It's a view that has a lot of good argumentation for it. And I don't think we should just reject this out of hand. There are good arguments to be made for this.

Elsewhere in the book of 1 Corinthians, we see Paul using these Corinthian quotations and refuting them, or arguing against them. So, all things are lawful for me. Paul brings that up twice.

And on both occasions, he puts a qualifying statement that challenges that. Now, this, however, is not as strong as a refutation. For the most part, these tend to be clarifying and qualifying statements that are more contextual.

So, all things are lawful for me, but not all things are expedient. So, he doesn't exactly refute that statement, not all things are lawful for me, but rather he challenges it with a strong qualification of that. What we have here would seem to go beyond that.

Lucy Peppiot's book, *Women in Worship in Corinth*, is perhaps the one to read for the

detailed explanation of this refutation quotation theory. One way or another, I don't think that this proves as much as people want it to. People would like to treat the arguments related to women and leadership and these sorts of things as if it hangs upon a few isolated texts.

And if you can knock down those texts one by one, you prove your case. There's a lot more going on here than that. And the statement, the reading of this as a refutation quotation, actually I'll give a brief explanation of how that might work.

It would, Paul would be arguing against the Corinthians who are saying that their more general principle that they put forward is that women should be silent in all of the churches. And it's shameful for women to talk in church. And then Paul's refutation to that is, do you think the word of God came from you alone? Don't you believe that God can speak through these women too? Are you going to silence these women just because of your spiritual pride? And I would recommend reading, I'll maybe link an article by Kirk MacGregor who gets into more detail on this particular theory and presents a good argument.

And I can see why many people would hold it. On the other hand, as I was about to say, this does not prove as much as people think. These are not isolated proof texts.

Rather, they tend to be based upon a deeper foundation, a foundation that's set up within the very order of creation. And within that order of creation, there is a recognition of boundaries. And so what Paul would be doing, even if you're refuting the Corinthian quotation here, he would be pushing back against a certain strong and excessive position.

But he wouldn't be overturning the whole order. He wouldn't be arguing for a more general free for all that men and women are exchangeable, interchangeable within the life of the church. That's not what he would be arguing.

Rather, he would be arguing that it is not appropriate to forbid women from exercising prophetic speech within the context of the assembly if that is done properly in an order. And that position, I don't think, is one that people are going to object to. I think that that's generally held.

And when you look at complementarian readings of this, it's interesting that most of them will see it as a very particular statement and would bound it by various qualifications. And clarifications and not see it as a general statement that takes full force that you suggest with it, that is suggested within this comment or this question. That they recognize that Paul's obviously not going that far.

And they'll think of different ways in which the context would bind it and restrict the scope of this particular command. I think that's important. Everyone has to do that to

some extent.

Everyone has to wrestle with the particular issues that are raised by that. As I mentioned before, Paul's refutations are usually qualifications, not outright contradictions, as it would have to be here. The other thing that you notice is that Paul's treatment within the context is of a disordered sort of worship.

An order of worship that's very much founded upon or a lack of order of worship. That's very much founded upon the idea that the spirit liberates, that the spirit enables us to exercise things without a need for self-control and order. Whereas Paul is stressing the need for order.

The spirit is the one who establishes order within the churches and the spirits of the prophets are subject to them or in submission to them. Or that they are kept in their ordered place by the prophets. And that in verse 32, I think, is helpful to bear in mind.

Because when he talks about what is generally translated as submission within this context, it's the same terminology he's using. That the spirits of the prophets are kept in their proper ordered place by the prophets. And so it's not that the spirits, the prophets have the ability to just speak at will and to ignore all proper order.

Rather, they should exercise self-control and the community, as it gathers together to worship and to hear God's word, should celebrate and act in an ordered fashion. And a lack of order, a disorder, is contrary to the spirit because the spirit is the author of order, not confusion. Now it would seem strange in some ways for Paul to be going from that immediate context and in that immediate context to be talking about this extreme notion of order.

This extreme notion that says that women should never speak within the context of the assembly. And that this is coming from the same people that he's challenging for a complete lack of order. There would seem to be a problem here that the theology of the Corinthians, we are shadow reading here.

We don't actually have their explicit theology presented to us. Rather, we are shadow reading from Paul's responses to them. But it would seem unlikely that this is the position that Paul is challenging.

Rather, in the context, the position is one that is characterized by disorder, by an emphasis upon a sort of charismatic, pneumatic freedom. A freedom in the spirit that overwhelms order. And a sort of freedom that would seem in this context to be particularly enjoyed by women who can ignore the general order of their society.

And they can speak with freedom and abandon as they are given this influence and power of the spirit to overcome the limitations of their place within society. And that is a position that Paul seems to be challenging here, it seems to me. There is a lot of

common vocabulary between these verses and the verses that immediately proceed.

And I think the verses that proceed will help us to place this in a better context, to have a clearer sense of what Paul is talking about. There are deeper issues here. As I've already mentioned, there's the spirit versus order.

There's the proper treatment of inspired speech. And there's themes of silence as well. The need for the prophets to exercise self-control.

And so the spirits of the prophets being subject or kept in their proper ordered place by the prophets. And then the need to prophesy one by one. And if someone is, someone sitting by has something revealed to them, the one who's prophesying should keep silent.

And so there's a larger context for what's being said here. A context of ordered speech, of self-control, of keeping silent. And I think this helps us to understand what's going on here.

First of all, it's a specific context. This is not a more general statement that's being made about the life of the church. It's a far more specific thing.

And the question of the nature of speech that's being spoken of, again, is a question that's raised by various people. Is Paul talking about women being silent and they're speaking in church? They're speaking as chattering in church. That they're sharing the gossip, that they're talking over proceedings.

And there's this hubbub from the women's quarter of the congregation. And I don't think that's the case. I think that within the context of 1 Corinthians 14, the speech that's being spoken of, and the same terminology is used for a more general practice of speech.

It's not just narrowly defined as chattering. And so I think that particular explanation is, again, it's an interesting one. It's a possible one, but I don't think it's very possible.

I think there are far more likely explanations. Beyond this, there is the significance of the judging of prophecy. And the judging of prophecy is something that hypothesizing from what we see in the context, that certain people would prophesy and then certain people would sit by and judge.

Now, within the synagogue context, and the Corinthian church originally grew out of a synagogue context, what we see are people who are the leaders of the synagogue will generally be sitting down and people proclaiming the word of God or prophesying will be standing up. And so we see that, for instance, the leading of the synagogue sitting down. It's something that we see, for instance, in Luke 4 and elsewhere, and then speaking up to proclaim the word, standing up to proclaim the word.

Within this context, then, it would suggest that there are prophets prophesying, and then there are the leaders of the synagogue and the leaders of the church sitting by and judging at certain points and in questioning and interrogating the prophet to test the spirit, to see whether what is said is true. This sort of prophecy is something that needs to be tested. It's not something that is infallible in the way that some would expect.

It needs to be tested because there are certain prophecies that are not true. And so there needs to be a process of testing and judging. And that takes place primarily by the leaders of the congregation.

Now, how would this explain the verses here concerning women? First of all, that there is a reference to questioning or interrogating the husbands. That some have suggested, and I think there's a good point to be made here, that this may have been something that was taking place within the context of the testing of the prophets. That there were women who were speaking up and speaking to interrogate prophets that had just delivered their message, and they were speaking particularly to their husbands.

And that was something that led to disorder and to disgrace. It was not appropriate. It was leading to a conflict and an upsetting of the order of the family, as the wives could challenge their husbands and question their husbands in a way that dishonoured them.

And Paul was speaking out against that. I think there's a more general point being made here though. I think the more general point is that there is a structure, an order within the life of the church, and that the Spirit is not contrary to that.

And within that order, there are processes of judgment and testing within the life of the church. And that will take place primarily with the leaders of the church, the elders and the pastors. And these people are the ones to judge, to interrogate, and then people should keep silent.

Others should keep silent at that time. Now, that judging, I think, here was exercised by a more general group. Paul is particularly concerned about the women exercising it, and more concerned also about women exercising it towards their husbands.

That's where it becomes extremely problematic. But there's already an issue of order here, that the order is also something that is more general to the churches. There's another issue that comes to the foreground here, that the Corinthians have a sort of spirit-driven unilateralism, that they think that they can act on their own accord.

They can act against the customs of the rest of the churches. They can act purely on their own supposedly spirit-driven initiative. And Paul challenges them, as in all of the churches, that this is the approach that should be taken.

And you Corinthians, do you think the Word of God has come to you alone? Do you think that this is something that is just for yourself, that you've only been the ones that the

Spirit has gone through to? And then he asks them to test his words, that if anyone is spiritual, let him recognise that what he is saying are the commands of God. And this, I think, fits very well into the broader pattern of his argument, that what he's pushing back against is a particular idea of the Spirit, a particular idea of the Spirit overturning order, enabling a unilateral approach to the ordering of worship, that you can just go about it with free abandon, because you have the Spirit, and you don't have to pay attention to other churches and the proper customs of the churches. What is the reference to the law here? Is Paul referring to a specific commandment? I don't think he is, and nor do I think that, as some have suggested, that he's referring to the order of Genesis 3.16, the order that's consequent upon the fall, with the woman's desire being for her husband, but her husband ruling over her.

I don't think that's what he's referring to. Rather, he's referring, as he refers to in 1 Timothy 2, he's referring to the general order of creation, which is given within the law. And that general order of creation is one in which there needs to be, I mean, what we see in Genesis 1 is the man is created to guard and to till the earth, and then he's placed within the garden to guard and to serve it.

And he's the one who's particularly responsible for the order of the garden. And the garden is seen as a sanctuary realm. The garden is also the realm of the tree, the sacred food, the food that he is not supposed to trespass and to take.

Then the woman is created and brought to him. And it's a very similar description to the way that the Levites are brought to Aaron, for instance, as those to help him within his task. But there is a specific responsibility that falls upon Adam within that context.

Later on, when there's judgment concerning the eating of the fruit, it's Adam who is judged. And God comes to him and he says, have you, you singular, eaten from the tree that I said, of which I said, you shall not eat of it. You again, singular.

The commandment is given to Adam in particular. And Adam in particular is responsible for upholding the order of the garden. There is a male priesthood inherent within the very order of creation.

And that is a symbolic order. And there are good reasons for this as you flesh it out in terms of the symbolism. I won't do that here.

But this is what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 11, in 1 Timothy 2. And this, I think, is what he's alluding to here as well, that there is a natural order. And what he's referencing is not a specific command that tells women not to speak. But a more general issue of women keeping to their ordered place.

And that's what is meant by submission here. It's not submission to their husbands. Rather, it's, again, the same terminology is used in reference to the spirits of the

prophets.

The point is that they should be kept in their ordered place. The point here, again, is not just repression to hold them down, to prevent them from doing this, that and the other. But a recognition of the proper order of creation.

The proper bounds of proper society, these sorts of things. And as this plays out within society, if it's done wrong, it brings disgrace and it upturns the order of the family. What you end up with is women and their husbands being placed at odds with each other.

What you end up with is the woman being deceived in Genesis. And then the man falling into sin again by failing to uphold the order of the garden. So when this order is ignored, problems arise.

And Paul is very concerned that the gift of the spirit is not seen to overturn the order that God has established in creation. The spirit restores and glorifies and raises up, renews and perfects creation. The spirit does not overwhelm and destroy the order of creation.

And so that order of creation is one that needs to be maintained within the life of the church in a way that recognizes that there is an appropriate pattern here. And so I think Paul is addressing a very specific context. He's addressing the context of the sifting or testing of prophecy and women's appropriate actions within that context, which is to keep silent.

It's not a more general point about women should never ever speak in church. Rather, women should keep silent at this particular point. And yet that more specific command is based upon general principles.

It's based upon general principles about the spirit and order. It's based upon general principles about the need for creation order. And it's based upon general principles about non-unilateral action on the part of churches and recognition of the broader pattern that God has established within the life of the church.

And then this, I think, can square quite well with verse 5 of chapter 11, that women are prophesying and exercising prophecy, but there is a limitation upon that. And so within the life of the church, women will prophesy, women will pray. And yet there will be limitations that are placed upon this.

So they will not be in the position of the judging of the prophecy, and particularly not when it comes to their husbands, because that overthrows the creation order. It leads to an imbalance and makes it very difficult also for a proper ruling of the church to take place. And this is one of the things that we do, I think, see that can be a problem.

When the ruling of the church and the testing of things increasingly becomes unisex

activity, the forceful testing of truth starts to become fraught with gendered dynamics. Gendered dynamics that make it very difficult to test things and to challenge things without being seen as being misogynistic or something like that, because you have to challenge, directly attack women's positions. And so within the life of the church, part of the point, I think, of having male leadership, male eldership, male guardians, and it's a more specific role.

It's not just men are the only ones that speak within the life of the church, or men are the only ones that exercise influence within the life of the church, or men are the only ones that are prominent within the life of the church. That is not what is being said here. Rather, the point is that there is a specific task of guarding that falls specifically to the man.

And within the garden, that was the male duty, the duty of Adam. And when Adam failed, everything went wrong. And so the need to exercise that role of guarding, I think, requires a tough testing of things and interrogation and challenging.

But when that becomes something that both men and women participate in, what we see often is things going wrong. It becomes very emotionally fraught. It's not that women are more emotional.

That's not the point. Rather, men get very emotional when they feel women are under attack. And so the man who, or when they feel that their private and family situation is being broadcast for the whole of the congregation, and they're having a conflict with their wife in public.

All of these situations do not lead to good order. They do not lead, they're not conducive for the upholding of truth, for the proper guarding of the church. So Paul is very concerned for this sort of thing.

In 1 Corinthians 11, and here, we see him concerned to recognise the importance of the spirit within the channels of creation. The spirit is not overwhelming the banks of creation and bringing disorder, but rather the spirit is establishing a proper order, but a glorious order. And this order, again, then is not the order of the fall, but the order of creation.

And the submission is not just to, is not to husbands, but to the natural order. And that's the important thing that Paul is concerned about here. And it leads into a deeper understanding of the flow of his argument throughout the whole epistle.

That throughout the whole epistle, Paul is concerned to show that the spirit and God's work are things of order. So we see the son is subject to the father and he delivers up the kingdom, that there is an order, that this kingdom is not just an overflowing of order, but rather it will happen in its proper way. And so the God is the head of Christ is

something that is a proper order.

And that is recognised within the way that the kingdom is offered up to the father by the son. And here we see the same thing, that there is an order of creation. This order is not one that's best understood in terms of hierarchy, but it's an order of people being in their proper place.

And the guarding of the church, the testing of prophecy, and the way that public speech plays into that is a matter of concern, as is the unilateralism of the Corinthian church. And so in all of these fronts, Paul is bringing through a deeper theology of order and the spirit, of creation and redemption, and of the church as being a unified entity, not just every member, every church, every group operating on their own accord for their own interests. I hope this helps.

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God bless.