

Examining the authenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35...
Part 2: A Study Into Histo-Cultural and Literary Context

To better *understand* Paul's epistles and the role of women, it is vitally important to understand the cultural context of the first century church, the historical context of the author Paul, and the literary context of his letter to the Corinthians. How does this help one understand Paul's directive in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35?

The First Century Church

During the first century, early Christianity started out in homes, and archeologists have noted that the dining room of a first century Graeco-Roman home measured 10 x 14 meters, which can accommodate about 20 people. Such home meetings were usually hosted by wealthy households or patrons, led by both men and women leaders, and overseen by itinerate apostles as exemplified by the New Testament evidence.

Lydia of Philippi (Acts 16:12-15, 40)

Titus Justus and Crispus (Acts 18:7-8)

Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2)

Stephanas (1 Cor 16:15-16)

Nympha of Laodicea (Col 4:15)

Apphia and Archippus (Philemon 1:1-2)

The organization of these small groups was informal yet a transition was taking place, which was reflected in the various terms used by the apostles to address the early patrons and leaders.

Elders (presbuteros) (Act 14:23)

he who leads (proistemi) (Rom 12:8)

Servant (diakonos) helper (prostatis) (Rom 16:1-2)

Administrations (kubernesis) (1 Cor 12:28)

Have charge over you (proistemi) (1 Thess 5:12)

Overseers and deacons (episkopoi kai diakonos) (Phil 1:1)

These small *private* household groups coalesced into larger *public* city congregations, which were led by chosen bishops / pastors who represented the next generation of leaders after the apostles. Because of Roman persecution of Christians, which started after the crucifixion of Jesus to about 310 AD with varying severity and in different regions of the Roman empire, Christian worship meetings became secretive and met in hidden places such as the catacombs. By 300 AD, the transition to exclusive male leadership was well established when basilicas were constructed and symbolized the public space for Christian worship.

The Role of Women in First Century Greek Society

First century Greek women did not have much independence or legal rights. Girls submitted to the authority of their father, and stayed at home with mother learning household skills and jobs such as cooking, sewing, and weaving. Academic education was often at home as well.

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Marriage was arranged, and girls usually married in their teens to men around 30 years of age. Once married, young women submitted to their husbands and spent most of her time in the home. The public role of women and the work they did depended on their status in Greek society. There were 3 classes of women:

1. Prostitutes and Slaves.

The lowest class of women was prostitutes and slaves. They were usually single and often poor (widows, foreigners, captives from wars, or unwanted girls) and worked in brothels. Because many were not citizens of Greece, they did not have any legal protections or restrictions confining them to the home as a housewife. As a "buyable woman," they were free to move about society, which promoted the idea that women in public were adulterous. Slaves were at the mercy of their masters.

2. Hetaerae (Hetaira).

This next class of women was Greek courtesans, which were prostitutes who also provided social and intellectual companionship to men. While prostitutes provided sexual services, hetaerae were also educated and skilled in performing arts (i.e. music, dance, etc). Thus they also moved freely within society and attended cultural events. Focused on pleasing men and making one love her, hetaerae desired to become a mistress or a concubine. And while Greeks were largely monogamous, some concubines did succeed in marriage. This class of women was popular, loved, and praised by men.

3. Wives.

Women achieved the most respect managing a household, but most marriages were not based on love. Wives of wealthy men had slaves to assist them in the management and duties of the home, which included making clothes for all, preparing food, and caring for the children. They rarely left the home as they could afford a slave to go out in public.

While men were culturally perceived as sexually aggressive, a woman's sexuality was considered more as property, devoted to one husband, and confined to the privacy of their home. This signaled her sexual exclusiveness and preserved the honor of her husband.

If a married woman left the confines of her home too often, her public appearances made her vulnerable to advances by other men, charges of neglecting her home, and a perception of being a gossip or adulterer. All of which brought shame to her husband.

Less respectable were wives of less affluent men who could not afford slaves. Thus, in addition to managing the household, they sometimes had to work in the fields harvesting or in the market buying and selling; they played a large part in the agrarian economy.

So while women were discouraged from being in public, there was one public duty expected of them. Women played an important role in funerals, because they were responsible for preparing the dead body and lead the funeral procession with food and drink to the gravesite.

An examination of some of the ancient texts authored in and around the period of the first century provides additional insight into cultural perceptions and expectations of respectable women in Greek society.

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The semi-mythical scientist Pythagoras, who died about 500 BC, had a huge influence on Greek thought. His work was one of history's earliest attempts at reconciling rational science and religious mysticism for the purpose of benefiting mankind. Established in southern Italy, Pythagoras founded a religious and scientific community that promoted the use of mathematics to analyze and explain natural phenomenon. These Pythagorean communities grew, spread, and settled in the Italian mainland, Sicily, and Greece.

One group of ancient texts is a collection of letters and works, believed to be authored by women of a Pythagorean community in Southern Italy including the wife and daughters of Pythagoras, that reflect upon the roles of women in particular their duties, their chastity, and their response to their husband's mistress. While these manuscripts are dated around third or second century BC, they reflected a thought on female roles held during that time and into the first and second century AD. Because of this subject matter, there is debate whether the texts were original or composed by men at different times and places.

"In general a woman must be good and orderly-and this no one can become without virtue... A woman's greatest virtue is chastity. Because of this quality she is able to honor and to cherish her own particular husband."

"Now some people think that it is not appropriate for a woman to be a philosopher, just as a woman should not be a cavalry officer or a politician ... I agree that men should be generals and city officials and politicians, and women should keep house and stay inside and receive and take care of their husbands. But I believe that courage, justice, and intelligence are qualities that men and women have in common... Courage and intelligence are more appropriately male qualities because of the strength of men's bodies and the power of their minds. Chastity is more appropriately female."

"As far as adornment of her body is concerned, the same arguments apply. She should be dressed in white, natural, plain. Her clothes should not be transparent or ornate. She should not put on silken material, but moderate, white-colored clothes. In this way she will avoid being over-dressed or luxurious or made-up, and not give other women cause to be uncomfortably envious. She should not wear gold or emeralds at all; these are expensive and arrogant towards other women in the village. She should not apply imported or artificial coloring to her face-with her own natural coloring, by washing only with water, she can ornament herself with modesty ..."

Aristotle, a Greek philosopher who studied under Plato and later founded his own school, was a brilliant man who is believed to have conceived and established many scientific subjects as systematic disciplines. His work was developed and expanded on by later students and had a large influence on Greek society.

In one of his works during 350 BC, Politics, part XIII, Aristotle makes a comment about a woman's role:

For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature. So it must necessarily be supposed to be with the moral virtues also; all should partake of them, but only in such manner and degree as is required by each for the fulfillment of his duty. Hence the ruler ought to have moral virtue in perfection, for his function, taken absolutely, demands a master artificer, and rational principle is such an artificer; the subjects, on the other hand, require only that measure of virtue which is proper to each of them. Clearly, then, moral virtue belongs to all of them; but the temperance of a man and of a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying. And this holds of all other virtues, as will be more clearly seen if we look at them in detail, for those who say generally that virtue consists in a good disposition of the soul, or in doing rightly, or the like, only deceive themselves. Far better than such definitions is their mode of speaking, who, like Gorgias, enumerate the virtues. All classes must be deemed to have their special attributes; as the poet says of women,

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*Silence is a woman's glory,
but this is not equally the glory of man."*

Plutarch, a Greek author who lived during the first century church, wrote of many famous Greek and Roman men highlighting qualities that he believed defined virtuous and good. His writings were popular and widely read. Here are some excerpts on his advice to a bride and groom.

A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends together with him. And the first and best friends are the gods in whom her husband believes and to shut her door to all magic ceremonies and foreign superstitions. For no god can be pleased by stealthy and surreptitious rites performed by a woman.

The economical woman ought not to neglect cleanliness and the wife who is devoted to her husband should also show a cheerful disposition; for economy ceases to please when it is combined with dirt, as does the most proper behavior in a wife when combined with an austere manner.

But it is a finer thing still for a man to hear his wife say 'My dear husband, "but to me you are" guide, philosopher and teacher in all that is most beautiful and most divine.' In the first place these studies will take away a woman's appetite for stupid and irrational pursuits. A woman who is studying geometry will be ashamed to go dancing and one who is charmed by the words of Plato or Xenophon is not going to pay any attention to magic incantations. For if they do not receive the seed of a good education and do not develop this education in company with their husbands they will, left to themselves, conceive a lot of ridiculous ideas and unworthy aims and emotions.

Jewish authors during the first century church shared similar sentiments about women as their Hellenistic counterparts.

"Market-places and council-halls and law-courts and gatherings and meetings where a large number of people are assembled, and open-air life with full scope for discussion and action — all these are suitable to men both in war and in peace. The women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house, within which the middle door is taken by the maidens as their boundary, and the outer door by those who have reached full womanhood." (Philo, Jewish philosopher)

"A woman, then, should not be a busybody, meddling with matters outside her household concerns, but should seek a life of seclusion. She should not show herself off like a vagrant in the streets before the eyes of other men, except when she has to go to the temple, and even then she should take pains to go, not when the market is full, but when most people have gone home, and so like a freeborn lady worthy of the name, with everything quiet around her, make her oblations and offer her prayers to avert the evil and gain the good." (Philo, Jewish philosopher)

"Women are inferior to men in every way." (Josephus, Jewish historian)

"A silent wife is a gift from the Lord." (Sirach, apocryphal author)

The person and author of the Epistles the Apostle Paul

Prior to his conversion and ultimately the Christian missionary to the Gentiles, the Apostle Paul was known as Saul. The Bible provides little biographical information; however, Paul indicated that he grew up in Tarsus (Acts 21:29), which in 42

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BC was granted the status of a “free city” by the Roman general Mark Antony. Tarsus, self-governing as a city-state and free of paying tribute to Rome, was still part of the Roman Empire and flourished in its coastal and intercontinental location with vibrant land and sea commerce.

Unique among the apostles, Paul was a Jew, a citizen of Tarsus, and a citizen of Rome (Acts 22:25-28). Paul's Roman citizenship is rather significant, because he was “born free” which meant that his father was a Roman citizen. Roman citizenship was rarely granted to Jews. While it could be purchased (for huge sums), Roman citizenship was often used as a reward to those who served the Roman Empire with distinction. In other instances, it was given when one was freed from slavery.

While Jews did not have a good relationship with Rome, who sought to bring about new beliefs and lifestyles, Paul was not ashamed of his Jewish ancestry (Rom 11:1, Phil 3:5). As a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, Paul's original name Saul was the same name of Israel's first king who arose from the same tribe.

Of the various groups of Jews, Paul belonged to the Pharisees (Acts 23:6) who were the most theologically conservative. His religious training took place in Jerusalem with Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel, grandson of the renown and perhaps greatest Jewish rabbi Hillel, was a revered rabbi (“my master”) in his own right who earned the title *Rabban* (“our master, our great one”). As a respected leader within the Sanhedrin, which his wise speech demonstrated (Acts 5:34-39), Jewish tradition portrays Gamaliel as devoted to God and the Law and stressing the importance of repentance more than works. Benefiting from one of the best teachers of the time, Paul developed an understanding of the Old Testament, which would enable him to clearly and logically explain Christian doctrine in light of the Old Testament and in particular with regard to the Mosaic Law.

As the fervent Pharisee Saul, Paul in his younger years began his vigorous persecution in Jerusalem of Jews who believed in Jesus Christ (Acts 8:3). He would later regret his “ignorance of unbelief” and consider himself as “the foremost of sinners” (1 Cor 15:9, Phil 3:6, Gal 1:13, 1 Tim 1:13-15).

After his conversion on the road to Damascus while on a mission to root out this new heretical Jewish sect, the Bible does not say when Saul's name was changed to Paul or whether God gave Saul his new name or whether Saul adopted it. After several years of seclusion, Paul emerged as a passionate missionary for Jesus Christ.

Sought by Barnabas to assist him in caring for the Gentile believers at Antioch, the Antioch church grew spiritually strong and sent Barnabas and Paul out on to their first successful missionary journey.

Confronted with the issue of Judaism existing within the church and separating Gentile from Jewish believers, Barnabas and Paul went to the Jerusalem church to discuss this with its elders. In the ensuing discussions, Paul's logical arguments convinced the Jerusalem church to free the Gentiles from Jewish regulations and swept away the class division between Jewish and Gentile believer; however, Paul's counter cultural positions and public rebuking against Jewish regulations (Gal 2:12-14) strained relationships with his Jewish Christian brethren.

On his second missionary journey, Paul visited Corinth (Acts 18:1-18) and established the Corinthian church, which was comprised of Jews, Greeks, and other Gentiles. After a stay of approximately 1-1/2 years, Paul left to visit Jerusalem.

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Early into his third missionary journey, while he was still in Ephesus, Paul heard of the spread of immorality and dissension within the Corinthian church from members of Chloe's household, which prompted him to write 1 Corinthians. An earlier letter to the Corinthians, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9 was misunderstood and was later lost. Three members of the church, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Cor 16:17) also met with Paul seeking advice on certain points regarding issues such as marriage, food sacrificed to idols, spiritual gifts, and charitable collections.

Paul's letters reflect a man of great faith, courage, and principle. He was serving during a time when the first century church was transitioning from private home meetings to larger public assemblies. And while Greek culture held women in low esteem, Paul encouraged them to learn and participate in worship.

With this background, how does one understand Paul's prohibition, "Let the women keep silent in the churches?" Was Paul's conviction in Jesus Christ so weak that he would succumb to the cultural norm of holding women in low esteem?