

Examining the authenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35...
Part 5: An Interpretation Within Context and Without Contradiction

1. What is the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35?

Acts 18:1-18 indicates the founding of the Corinthian Church during Paul's second missionary journey. After eighteen months, Paul leaves the church of Corinth under the care of Aquila and Priscilla, and continues with his second missionary journey.

While staying in Ephesus during his third missionary journey, Paul received two letters from Christians in Corinth. The letters reveal a church that was struggling against the cultural norms of Corinth, beset with immorality, division, and abuse of spiritual gifts. In response, Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians concerned about their pride and lack of true love for the church.

In chapters 12-14, Paul addresses the issue of spiritual gifts and explains their nature and purpose. These diverse gifts, worthy if only exercised on the basis of love, were for the benefit of the whole congregation. In chapter 14, Paul compares two of the more spectacular spiritual gifts, prophecy and tongues. Because the gift of prophecy edifies and educates the congregation and the gift of tongues edifies only the speaker, the gift of prophecy is more desirable.

At the end of chapter 14 (1 Cor 14:26-33), Paul instructs how these two spectacular spiritual gifts should be expressed and weighed in a manner that would be God pleasing and orderly during public worship. A further comment by Paul instructs (1 Cor 14:33-36) women, who may have the gift of tongues or prophecy or simply questions, on how they should conduct themselves during public worship.

There are some interesting observations and parallelisms that affirm the context and placement of 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 (for more discussion, see: Examining the authenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35... Part 1: A Peek Into the Discipline of Lower Criticism at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/11Church/PublicExaminingAuthenticity1CorLowerCriticism.aspx).

Paul addresses specific groups of people in a logical order and with a pattern:

People with the gift of tongues – verses 27-28

Instruction – verse 27

Conditional clause – verse 28

People with the gift of prophecy – verses 29-33a

Instruction – verse 29

Conditional clause – verse 30

Women (who may have the gift of tongues or prophecy) – verses 33b-35

Instruction – verse 34a

Conditional clause – verse 35a

2. Examine and study some of the Greek words that form 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

34a) The women (gunaikes) are to keep silent (sigatoosan) in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak (lalein),

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The Greek word for “women” here is “gunaikes,” which refers to women of any age, whether virgin, married, or widowed. The interpretation does not mean “wives,” because Paul does not restrict the meaning of “gunaikes” in this passage. In other instances, where Paul used the term “gunaikes” to refer to “wives,” he used it within the context of “husbands” (see Eph 5:22).

The Greek word for “keep silent” here is “sigatoosan.” Paul’s directive “keep silent” is not an absolute command for women to be mute during the entire public worship, but within the context of the Greek term “lalein,” which means, “not permitted to speak.”

Examine carefully the context of the passage and Paul’s use and meaning of the Greek terms “lalein” and “sigatoo”:

Verses 27-28: If anyone speaks (**lalei**) in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent (**sigatoo**) in the church; and let him speak (**laleitoo**) to himself and to God.

For those with the gift of tongues, Paul commands silence for those tongue speakers without an interpreter.

Verses 29-35: Let two or three prophets speak (**laleitoosan**), and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent (**sigatoo**). For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. The women are to keep silent (**sigatoosan**) in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak (**lalein**), but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

For those with the gift of prophecy, they may utter their prophecy or weigh the prophecies spoken by other prophets. Paul commands silence among the prophets so that each can speak in turn, and he commands silence of the women.

Within the context of the passage, Paul used the verb “laleoo” to refer to a special type of speaking during public worship. As a contrasting complement, Paul used the verb “sigao” to refer to the silencing of those special types of speech in public worship.

Because Paul allows for women to publicly prophesy (1 Cor 11:1-16), his command to women is a prohibition to the public oral weighing of prophecy.

The exegesis and discussion of prophecy is the essence of teaching and the distinction between the two spiritual gifts of prophecy and teaching. In the Old Testament, while some women were prophetesses, none were ever recorded as priests, and it was the priests who provided authoritative instruction to the people (Lev 10:11, Deut 21:5, Mal 2:6-7). This concept of male-only teachers in the public assembly is acknowledged in the New Testament as well (1 Tim 2:11-15).

34b) but are to subject themselves (hupotassesthoosan), just as the Law (ho nomos) also says.

The Greek word for “subject themselves” is “hupotassesthoosan,” which is in reference to a voluntary restraint.

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The Greek word for “the Law” is “ho nomos.” While there has been much debate of what “the law” means (see: Examining the authenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35... Part 4: A Review of Various Interpretations at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/11Church/PublicExaminingAuthenticity1CorReviewOfInterpretations.aspx), the meaning taken here is the Pentateuch. Some scholars argue that there are no such teachings in the Pentateuch; however, in the phrase “kathoos kai ho nomos legei” (“as the Law also says”), Paul uses the Greek term “kathoos” which allows for “similarity of teaching” (in contrast to an exact wording).

The Old Testament teaching that serves as the basis of Paul’s directive is found in Genesis 2:18-25, which he referenced earlier in the same letter in 1 Corinthians 11:7-12. In this passage, three observations can be made (for more discussion, see Observing the Creation of Man at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/7Humans/ManObservingTheCreationOf.aspx):

1. Woman was created from man, but created for man.
2. Adam welcomes the woman, but names her Woman.
3. Woman was created as an individual, but she learns about herself from Adam.

Paul directs women to submit themselves in recognition of God’s created order. While God created both sexes of human beings as ontologically equal (for more discussion, see: Justified Equally... but what does that mean? at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/9Salvation/JustifyEquallyWhatDoesThatMean.aspx), God chose one to be superordinate over the other.

A report to the church entitled *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice* by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod) notes:

The concept of headship is not only misunderstood, but it is also frequently abused... The Scriptures teach that headship exists for the sake of serving others, of building up others. Christ taught that His followers are to be servants. Self-willed assertion over another for one’s own personal advantage violates and perverts the headship principle of which the apostle speaks... All of the Scripture passages which speak of the subordination of the woman to the man, or of wives to their husbands, are addressed to the woman. The verbs enjoining subordination in these texts are in the middle voice in the Greek (reflexive). The woman is reminded, always in the context of an appeal to the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ, that she has been subordinated to man by the Creator and that it is for this reason that she should willingly accept this divine arrangement... People can be subordinate by serving others, by cooperating with another’s purposes, or by following another’s teaching. The more love and commitment to the interest of others (Philippians 2:4) are present in the relationship of the man to the woman, the more this subordinate relationship conforms to the Scriptural ideal.

Thus Paul does not permit women speaking in a certain way during public worship (i.e. the oral weighing of prophecy), because he does not believe that women should be functioning as a priest / teacher during the public assembly of Believers. Later in 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul would write that God did not turn over to women the activity of teaching in the public assembly.

35) If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands (andras) at home; for it is improper (aishron) for a woman to speak in church.

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The Greek term “andras” can also be translated as “menfolk,” because the context of Paul’s message is not constrained to the translation to only “husbands”.

Verse 35a suggests that men asked questions of the pastor(s) / teacher(s) at some point during the public assembly. Paul’s request that women “ask their own menfolk at home” implies that men had religious discussions at the public assembly and that men also had a priestly function in their own home, which is consistent with God’s view of firstborns and the law of primogeniture (see the article: Firstborn and the Law of Primogeniture at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/10ChristianLiving/FamilyFirstbornLawOfPrimogeniture.aspx).

The Greek term “aishron,” which the NASB translates as “improper” is based on the root word “aischos,” which means “disgrace”, “shame”, or “dishonor.” Paul’s use of the term “aishron” casts an air of shamefulfulness for those women who violates Paul’s directive against the oral weighing of prophecy and asking questions in the public assembly. The shame of the woman is before God in opposition to His created order and before her husband or father in the public assembly.

3. Examine 1 Corinthians 14:36-39 and recognize Paul’s logic. What is Paul saying here?

If a woman has the authority to prophesy, why does Paul disallow her oral weighing of prophecy? Because Paul said that prophecies must be evaluated, New Testament prophets clearly did not have the same authority as prophets of the Old Testament (see Examining the authenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35... Part 3: A Look at What Prophecy Means at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/11Church/PublicExaminingAuthenticity1CorWhatProphecyMeans.aspx); thus, not all New Testament prophecies were truly all or part of divine authority. This oral weighing or evaluation / discussion of prophecies was akin to the function of a teacher, which Paul considers a male function in the presence of a church assembly.

The Corinthians’ problems with such things as the exercise of the spiritual gifts of tongues, prophecy, and the ecclesiastical role of women reflected a disturbing attitude of a church that boldly did not conform to the practice of all the other churches (33b) and to the Scriptures (36).

The Corinthians apparently believed that their own revelations were superior to the authority of Scripture and apostolic determined practices of *all* the other churches. Paul’s statement in verse 36 reflects this, “Was it from you that the Word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?” Using this form of logical argument, Paul intended to reinforce the truth of the preceding verses.

With his apostolic status, as one having spoken to Jesus Christ, Paul’s New Testament prophecies carried the authority of the Old Testament prophets. Verse 37 reflects this authority, the Lord’s commandment (spoken through Paul), as being the standard by which New Testament prophecies are weighed against. And verse 38 is the consequence of those false prophets whose prophecies fail to pass muster to this standard in their oral weighing by other prophets. This is why prophecy is a more desirable gift than tongues: a true New Testament prophet receives both the Word of God and the ability to discern the truth or falseness of other prophecies for the edification of the whole church.

References:

1. Maier II, WA, *An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-38* in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, V. 55 (1991).
2. Piper, J, Grudem, W, eds, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books (1991), p. 151-153.

