

Examining the authenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35...
Part 4: A Review of Various Interpretations

Interpreting 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is difficult and challenging. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses a unique problem that they were having regarding women. While he does not define the problem, Paul certainly addresses the attitude behind it (1 Cor 14:36). How does one reconcile these words in light of Paul's recognition that women may pray or prophesy in the church assembly a few pages earlier in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16?

Some ignore 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, because they consider it an interpolation, not Paul's words, and therefore not part of the Bible. Yet the basis for this conclusion is weaker than the evidence that supports the verses as being authentic (for discussion of this, see the article: 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. This therefore demands an exegesis and many have offered several interpretations:

- A. The demand for a woman's silence is an absolute rule in the church assembly.
- B. The demand for a woman's silence is to the order of worship not to men.
- C. The demand for a woman's silence applies only to married women.
- D. The demand for a woman's silence is in response to a local and specific group of women.
- E. The demand for a woman's silence is a reference to the Corinthians or a quote from their letter.

A. The demand for a woman's silence is an absolute rule in the church assembly

This interpretation is based on:

- 1) 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is in reference to a home gathering where women may pray and prophesize, or a concession where women may pray and prophesy under the restriction of the head covering or a concession to women who cannot submit to 1 Corinthians 14:33-36, and
- 2) 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 is in reference to a church assembly where women may not pray or prophesize,

There are problems with this interpretation:

- 1) Pentecost (Acts 2:16) was a fulfillment of Joel 2:28-29 which prophesied that the Spirit would be poured on both men and women enabling them to prophecy. In 1 Corinthians 14:23-29, Paul considers the gift of prophecy as occurring within the context of the church assembly and where it could be evaluated.
- 2) 1 Corinthians 11:16 and 14:33 indicate that Paul refers to a standard of church practice within the context of an assembly; its reference goes beyond a small private home gathering. Either Paul does not allow the Corinthian practice or that all of the other churches do not allow such practice.

B. The demand for a woman's silence is to the order of worship not to men

This interpretation is based on:

- 1) 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 permits women to pray and prophesy, and
- 2) 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 is in reference to the worship service where women may not pray or prophesy.

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a) Paul was not referring to the subordination of women to men; instead, women were subordinated to the order of worship. Paul was concerned with the disruption of the worship service by women involved with noisy discussions about tongues and prophecy. He did not want women to publicly clamor for their explanation and instead discuss the matter with their husbands or menfolk at home.

There are problems with this interpretation:

- 1) The verb “submit” or “subordinate” usually refer to subordination of a person or persons to a person or persons, not to any order, procedure, or institution.
- 2) There is no explanation why only women are singled out to submit to ecclesiastical order.

C. The demand for a woman’s silence applies only to married women

This interpretation is based on:

- 1) 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 permits women to pray and prophesy, and
- 2) 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 is in reference to a church assembly where only *married* women may not pray or prophesy,
 - a) Paul was directing his prohibition only to married women who were uneducated and had nothing of value to say; they disturbed the church assembly with questions. Married women must exhibit self-control and avoid interrupting the proceedings of the church assembly by reserving such questions for their husbands at home.
 - b) In another view, Paul directs his restrictions only to married women, because he prefers the “unmarried state” (1 Cor 7:8). But because he expects a strong negative reaction to these restrictions by the church, he claims the authority of the Lord.

There are problems with this interpretation:

- 1) The Greek term “gunaikes,” refers to women of any age married or single, and the context here does not restrict its interpretation to only “married women.”
- 2) Within the historical context of the time, a *married* woman enjoyed greater social status and freedoms than single women (see Examining the authenticity of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35... Part 2: A Study Into Histo-Cultural Context at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/11Church/PublicExaminingAuthenticity1CorHistoCultural.aspx). This interpretation is in contradiction to the socio-historical context; it suggests that married women lose some measure of freedom.
- 3) This is contrary to Paul’s recognition and support of married missionary couples, and it doesn’t make sense that Paul would say something he knows to be ridiculous and prepare for the public outrage by appealing to the Lord’s authority.

D. The demand for a woman’s silence is in response to a local and specific group of women

This interpretation is based on:

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- 1) 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 permits women to pray and prophesy, but
- 2) 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 is directed towards silencing a local problem: a) noisy women, or b) uneducated unruly women.
 - a) 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 addresses and is limited to a local problem, because the verses interrupt the discussion on prophecy and tongues and is based on Jewish prejudice.

There are problems with this interpretation:

- 1) This interpretation presumes a local problem to escape the conflict with 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and the problem of the generic use of the term “women” in 1 Corinthians 14:33-36.
- 2) This interpretation begs the question: if some women were noisy, why were all women prohibited from talking? Were there no noisy men? If some women were uneducated and unruly, why were all women prohibited from talking? Were there no uneducated men?
- 3) Based on 1 Corinthians 14:33, the Corinthian church was not practicing in accordance to the standard of other churches. Paul’s directive defined a *standard* for church practice, which goes beyond a local problem; hence, this interpretation implies that all Christian women were noisy or uneducated and unruly.

E. The demand for a woman’s silence is a reference to the Corinthians or a quote from their letter

This interpretation is based on:

- 1) 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 states that women may pray and prophesy, and
- 2) 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 was a summary (or a quote from their letter) of a misconception held by Corinthian men, which was based on a Jewish slogan, rabbinic saying, or Jewish oral law (Talmud). 1 Corinthians 14:36 was a rebuke of their misconception that women be silent when the Word of God was being taught.
 - a) The word “law” does not refer to the Old Testament, because the Old Testament does not instruct women to be silent or directly support 1 Corinthians 14:34. Genesis 1:26, 2:21, and 3:16 do not pertain to denying women the right to speak in a church assembly.

Whenever Paul appeals to the “law,” such as in the phrase “just as the Law says,” he usually quotes the Old Testament to substantiate his statement. Because 1 Corinthians 14:34 is an exception from this pattern, Paul could not be referring to the Old Testament in this verse.

If the term “law” does refer to the Old Testament, it contradicts Paul’s statement that we have been liberated from the law (Rom 3:28, 6:14, 7:16; Gal 3:11-13, 4:5).

Because the term “law” cannot refer to the Old Testament, the term “law” referred to a Jewish slogan, rabbinic saying or Jewish oral law (Talmud).

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- b) At the beginning of 1 Corinthians 14:36, the Greek word for “or” is not a *comparative* particle but a *disjunctive* particle. In this context, the first word of the translation should read as a horrified or shocked response, “*What?!*”
- c) In 1 Corinthians 14:36, the Greek word for “only” (*monous*) is in the masculine sense. In this context, the translation would read, “Did the word of God originate with *you men only?*”
- d) Paul’s rebuke is thus seen as, “*What! Did the word of God originate with you men only?*” In this interpretation, Paul’s rebuke is understood to refute the preceding verses 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

There are problems with this interpretation:

1) It is not likely that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 was a quotation. When Paul does quote from a source within the same sentence,

a) the quotes are usually short (bold text indicates what scholars consider quotes):

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. **All things are lawful for me**, but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Cor 6:12)

Now concerning the things about which you wrote, **it is good for a man not to touch a woman**. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. (1 Cor 7:1-2)

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. **Knowledge makes arrogant**, but love edifies. (1 Cor 8:1)

b) the quotes are followed by a qualification (bold text indicates the qualification):

All things are lawful for me, **but not all things are profitable**. All things are lawful for me, **but I will not be mastered by anything**. (1 Cor 6:12)

Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. **But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband**. (1 Cor 7:1-2)

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, **but love edifies**. (1 Cor 8:1)

c) Paul’s qualifications and principles are clear.

If 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is a quote, its literary structure fails Paul’s pattern of quoting within a sentence; moreover, the principle being illustrated with the hypothetical quote is ambiguous and unqualified.

2) Close observation of 1 Corinthians 14:34 shows that Paul’s use of the term “law” was to substantiate the concept of submission, not specifically to the prohibition of women speaking. “*The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, **but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.***”

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Paul's appeal to the law is a reference back to 1 Corinthians 11:7-12 where he first discusses authority and submission within the context of proper forms of worship. It is here that Paul alludes to the Old Testament and the basis for authority and submission found in Genesis 2:18-23.

3) It has never been substantiated that Paul ever used the word "law" to refer to Jewish tradition or any extra-biblical oral tradition in any of his letters. In virtually all cases, Paul uses the term "law" to refer to rules or regulations with a prescriptive intent, and it can be substantiated that this usually meant the Mosaic Covenant or Scripture (the Old Testament).

a) The phrase "the law says" in 1 Corinthians 14:34 is found in only two other instances, Romans 3:19 (see Rom 3:10-19) and 1 Corinthians 9:8 (see 1 Cor 9:8-10).

Romans 3:19 refers to the Old Testament:

Romans 3:12 comes from Psalms 14:1-3, 53:1-3, and Ecclesiastes 7:20.

Romans 3:13 comes from Psalms 5:9 and 140:3.

Romans 3:14 comes from Psalms 10:7.

Romans 3:15 comes from Proverbs 1:16

Romans 3:17 comes from Isaiah 59:7-8.

Romans 3:18 comes from Psalm 36:1

1 Corinthians 9:8 refers to the Mosaic Covenant:

1 Corinthians 9:8 comes from Deuteronomy 25:4.

4) The masculine sense for the Greek word for "only" (*monous*) is not germane to the interpretation of the text. People are generically considered in the masculine sense in Greek, and there is ample evidence for this. If Paul intended to make a reference to men, it is unlikely that he would ambiguously imply "men" by using the masculine sense for the Greek word for "only."

5) While it is likely that the Greek word for "or" at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 14:36, is a *disjunctive* particle, the basis for justifying the translation to read as a shocked response, "What?!" is unfounded.

Some commentators have cited a principle from *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* in which a disjunctive particle located before a sentence, contradicts the one preceding it. This justification is incorrect, because these commentators have selectively cited a portion of this principle, which has led to their misunderstanding.

The correct citation of Thayer's principle is that the disjunctive may appear "before a sentence contrary to the one just preceding, to indicate that if one be denied or refuted the other must stand." To understand Thayer correctly, the disjunctive particle is *not used to contradict* the preceding clause or sentence, but to present a *logical argument to reinforce* the preceding clause or sentence. That this is indeed a principle is substantiated by the fact that in every instance in the New Testament, where the disjunctive particle in question is used in a construction analogous to 1 Corinthians 14:36, its effect is to **reinforce** the truth of the clause or sentence that precedes it.

Thayer's example of Romans 3:29 illustrates his principle.

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Romans 3:29 begins with the disjunctive particle, and it is obviously clear that it is not intended to contradict the preceding sentence. It is a logical argument using a rhetorical question to reinforce the idea that God is not only the God of Jews but for all of mankind.

Other examples that can be examined are Matthew 20:15 and 1 Corinthians 9:6; 10:22; 11:14.

6) There is little evidence that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 was a quote from a letter or a misconception held by Corinthian men based on a Jewish slogan or rabbinic saying. Furthermore, the Thayer's principle indicates that Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 14:36 was intended to reinforce the truth of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

In attempting to understand 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, one is forced to reconcile and harmonize their interpretation with 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Because Paul never clearly states the problems afflicting the Church at Corinth, the interpreter is left with the difficulty of examining the problematic attitudes Paul addresses for clues of the root problems.

One clue is found in two passages where Paul uses the Greek term "aischron" which means "shame, dishonorable, disgrace."

*For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is **disgraceful** for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head.* (1 Corinthians 11:6)

*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.* (1 Corinthians 14:35)

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul refers to man as "head" and in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, he speaks of "submission." Paul is clearly concerned with what is shameful for women within the context of how they are to relate to men of the church.

In the case of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, as Paul emphasizes the headship of men, the issue is doing something that would dishonor the role of men as leaders of the church. It isn't that women are praying and prophesying in public, but whether their dress and demeanor affirm the headship of men.

In a similar fashion, the Corinthian problem alluded to in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is not whether women have the ability to speak, but whether what they were saying was appropriate and consistent with the demeanor he spoke of in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

References:

1. Piper, J, Grudem, W, eds, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books (1991), p.140-153.