

## WOMEN'S ROLES AND 1 CORINTHIANS 14:34

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Relevant contrasts. The statements in 1 Corinthians 14:34 appear in a context that contrasts “not speaking” with insubordination and causing confusion. Earlier in 1 Corinthians Paul talks about women praying and prophesying (11:2-16). Evidently Paul’s meaning in the expression “be silent” is in contrast to speaking in such a way that creates disorder and implies a rebellious spirit. The English word “quiet” may be a closer synonym to the term in the original language, because “quiet” does not necessarily mean absolutely silent so much as verbally and behaviorally restrained.

The Spirit’s subjection to the prophet. Subjection is not bad. One fundamental problem in women’s studies generally is the assumption that being subordinate means being less valuable, especially if the subordinate person has no possibility of being other than subordinate. It is the assumption that there is no reason for being “second in command” except being less capable. But in 1 Corinthians, even the Holy Spirit is said to be subject, not to the Father and the Son in this case, but to the prophet. Subjection simply means relating appropriately to another person who has final responsibility for the work of the group and has been given authority for fulfilling that responsibility.

Comparison to church meals. A reader wonders whether the force of 1 Corinthians 14:34 may compare with that of 1 Corinthians 11:22. The latter text is not forbidding Christians to eat together; it is saying that if they are going to use eating together as a time to cause division, to be insensitive, and to put each other down, then they should eat at home. That is a different thing from forbidding common meals as such. The prohibition is in terms of an assumed set of inappropriate conditions.

Likewise, Paul may not be prohibiting women from prophesying when he says they should be “silent.” He may mean that if they are going to prophesy in a way that causes disorder and communicates lack of deference, then they need to be quiet. (This suggestion works even if we assume that “silent” means not speaking.) It is something he says first to men and women alike as a more general principle (14:26-33a); then he applies it to women as especially appropriate, because they are to “keep their place” in relation to their husbands. The reason against confusion applies to men and women indiscriminately (26-33a); the additional reason against insubordination applies to women. It is particularly embarrassing (“shameful”) for women to behave “stridently” in public. Doing so is not only inappropriate because it produces disorder, but because it lets out an embarrassing family secret: “*This lady does not respect her husband at home or she would not feel free to act this way in front of him in public.*”

It is perhaps expected that the relatively greater freedom and ennoblement of women in the church *vs.* the synagogue or even Greek culture could lead to excesses in the case of some who want to push things too far because of their own propensity to seek control or get attention.

The reader may note the following elements of similarity between agape feasts and women’s prophesying. (a) There is a similarity between “*when you come together*” (14:26 + 11:20) and “*in church*” (14:35, 28, 33? + 11:22). (b) There are also the similar expressions “*What, don’t you have houses to eat in?*” (11:22) and “*What, was it from you that the word of God went forth or came to you?*” (14:36). This contrasts with 14:33b: “*as in all the churches.*” The effect can be put this way: “*Do you think you are an exception to the rule that applies*

*everywhere else? Did you originate the expectancies and set the pattern? Are you the only ones that have to do with the gospel?"*

The meaning of λαλέω (*laleō*, “to speak”) must be more specific than merely saying something. (a) “*The woman could ask her husband at home*” may suggest “speaking” in the sense of “badgering.” (b) The comment about “*the Spirit of the prophet being subject to the prophet*” may imply “speaking” as emotionally driven verbalization, driven in a way that it interrupts (14:27-29) or harangues—gets started and does not stop. (“*If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first one become silent,*” 14:30.) Women’s generally greater verbalization skills together with their tendency toward greater emotional involvement make this result more natural for them.

No localized instruction. The directives Paul gives regarding public relational behavior between men and women (veil-wearing, praying and prophesying, asking questions) are not localized to Corinth. He goes out of his way to stress the fact that the Corinthians are not special (14:36), and he is not treating them any differently than he treats the other churches (14:33b; 11:16, 2-3; cp. Titus 1:5).

“Custom” of veil-wearing. Paul calls veil-wearing a “custom,” which could contrast with “commandments” of the Lord. There are two levels to the veil-wearing issue: (a) the principle of female deference in general and (b) veil-wearing as an indication of that deference specifically (11:10). “Custom” could be broad enough to include both levels (Acts 6:14 speaks of “*the ἔθνη [ethnē, customs] of Moses*”; cp. συνήθεια [*synētheia*] in 1 Corinthians 11:16). Under appropriate conditions veil-wearing could be dispensed with inasmuch as it is not an inherently necessary way of expressing deference. (Eve presumably wore no veil even after the expulsion from the garden.) But the deference issue is based on first principles: (1) the sequence of creating Adam and Eve (1 Timothy 2:13); (2) the order and manner of their falling into sin (1 Timothy 2:14); and (3) the analogy between man-woman order and God-Christ order (1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:26-28; Romans 5:19; Philippians 2:8), Christ-church order (Ephesians 5:23, 29), and Christ-man order (1 Corinthians 11:3).

Whether veil-wearing was or was not a custom of the church as such (vs. a cultural practice not discarded by the church) is unclear in 1 Corinthians 11:16: “*We have no such custom*” could mean no custom of not wearing the veil, or it could mean no custom of wearing the veil. In the second case, Paul’s point would be, “*If a person wants to make a fuss about wearing a veil, do not push the matter to the point of creating division over it; it is not a church matter per se.*” The other way the point would be that the contentious person should know that Paul and other churches are in agreement with the veil-wearing policy. The contender cannot suppose that this is a special restriction placed on the Corinthian church.

Home and church. We wonder also how the fact that churches usually met in homes affected the close connection between family structure and church structure. The man-woman role relationship at home would foster appropriate behavior “in church” because churches often met in homes.

The comparison between church and home behavior is natural additionally, however, because they must be compatible for practical purposes (14:33-35). Both home and church deal with the full range of life issues and the same people. There cannot be one structure at home and the reverse of it at church: husbands as responsible heads of the home, but wives as heads of the church. The functioning of the home and of the church deal with many of the same issues.

Some adjustments to this generality may have come up in the cases of virgins and widows. They would not be operating in relation to husbands at home. (We would assume that

virgins would operate in relation to fathers normally.) Widows enrolled in the care of the church may have been given certain responsibilities in return for the support they received.

“Prophesy” vs. “teach.” In 1 Corinthians 14 and 11 the subject is prophesying and praying, not teaching, which is the subject in 1 Timothy 2. No woman is ever said to have taught in the first-century church (except in an unofficial sense as in Titus 2:3-5; cp. 2 Timothy 1:5 + 3:14-15), although women did “*prophesy*” (1 Corinthians 14:26-36; 11:2-16; Acts 21:9; 2:18 < Joel 2:28; cp. 18:26?). The inference seems to be that “teaching” referred to the role associated with elder-bishop-pastor-teacher-ruler. The thing Paul does not allow in 1 Timothy 2 is the eldership role, and therefore with exercising “dominion”—responsibility reinforced by authority (cp. the creation account where God gave mankind dominion over the earth). “Teaching” in this case connotes official teaching—teaching in an official capacity.

Culture. A cultural element may enter in here because the connotation of “teacher” may have been informed by rabbinic backgrounds as well as the philosophical tradition among the Greeks. Today in the western world, we probably do not associate authority with teaching so readily as people did in ancient Jewish culture particularly. To a certain extent culture is involved in the way we view teaching, but it is doubtful that culture has the same prominence in this matter as it does in veil-wearing, footwashing, the holy kiss, and even slavery perhaps.