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WOMEN'S ISSUES:

Women: Keeping Silent in the Church

Understanding the issue:

First Corinthians 14:33b-35 is a passage which many debate. Some use it as a license to silence women and oppress them, while others interpret it in a way that oversteps the bounds of Scripture. The purpose of this article is to attempt to understand the Apostle Paul's intent in this passage. This section of 1 Corinthians, as well as Chapter 11, are interpreted in various ways with much controversy. The author's desire is to present this material within the confines of Scripture. It is not his goal nor desire to hinder women by keeping them from carrying out God's will for them, nor to see them involved in ministries that displease God and therefore disgrace them (1 Cor. 14:35). Realizing the difficulty of this passage, the author humbly submits his understanding of this issue in the following pages.



Understanding the biblical context:

To understand these verses one needs to interpret them in the context of their chapter, then within the context of Chapters 11-14, next within the book of 1 Corinthians, followed by the context of the New Testament, and finally within the context of the whole of Scripture. Paul's main goal in 1 Corinthians is to correct error and to deal with the problems of division (1:10-17) and pride (cf. 4:6,18,19; 5:2; 8:1-2; 13:4). One needs to therefore keep these things in mind as he interprets these verses. Another issue to understand is that there obviously was a problem with the women of the Corinthian church which Paul needed to correct in Chapter 11 and again in Chapter 14. In Chapters 11 through 14, Paul focused on issues related to the church service. It is unclear, however, if the section on head coverings (11:2-16) was specific only to the worship service. After his correction concerning head coverings, Paul addressed problems the Corinthians were experiencing with the Lord's Supper (11:17-34) and spiritual gifts (12), specifically discussing how prophecy was superior to the gift of tongues, and how they were to be used within the church service (14:1-25). He then concluded with a section on church order (14:26-40). Chapter 13 -- the love chapter -- was strategically placed to remind the proud Corinthian believers (cf. 1 Cor. 1:12; 4:6,18,19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4) that love, along with faith and hope (13:13), were to be more coveted than possessing a supernatural sign gift (cf. 13:1-2).

For a more specific context, in Chapter 14 Paul showed the Corinthians that they should not be misusing the gift of tongues in the church service (cf. vss. 13-19, 27-28). He made it clear that prophecy was the superior gift; that it edifies the church (vss. 1,3,4,5), and that it should be earnestly desired (vs. 39). Tongues on the other hand was a sign for unbelievers (vs. 22), which when misused would cause believers (who were unaware of spiritual gifts) and unbelievers alike to think that the possessors of this gift and the church in which they were prophesying were mad (vs. 23). It is after this portion of correction that Paul gives guidelines for the purpose of setting in order the services of the Corinthian church (vss. 26-36) since God (vs. 33) and Paul (vs. 40) wanted all things to be done properly and in order.

In verses 26-40, Paul gave the necessary guidelines to restore church order. He addressed three main issues: tongues (vss. 27-28), prophecy (vss. 29-33a) and women's conduct in the church (vss. 33b-36). Verse 26 is Paul's introductory verse in which he transitioned from his correction on tongues and prophecy to this section on church order. In doing this he asked the question: "What is *the outcome* then, brethren?" He then answered his own question at the end of the verse when he said, "Let all things be done for edification." If things are not done within the church properly and in order, people will not be edified to the greatest possible degree. How then were things to be done in an orderly fashion within the Corinthian church? First, in a service where some in attendance had the gift of tongues (the ability to speak in one or more foreign languages which they did not previously know; cf. Acts 2:1-11); and if they desired to speak in one of these tongues, only two or three of them could do so and only if there was a person present with the gift of interpretation to interpret for them. If a person was not there to interpret, they were to keep silent (vs. 28). Second, if prophets were present, only two or three of them were allowed to speak, and then as God gave them a prophecy. When God gave one of them a prophecy, the others were to keep silent (vs. 30). These things were to be done in this manner because, as Paul concluded this portion in verse 33, "for God is not a *God* of confusion but of peace." Third, women who were present in the services were to keep silent in the church (vs. 34). The question is: "Why would Paul make this statement?" Keeping in mind that Paul was continuing to correct abuses associated with church order in this section, one needs to continue within this contextual vein when interpreting these verses.

Before further consideration of this statement about women being silent in the church, please note verse 33. This verse concludes with the words, "as in all the churches of the saints." In some Bible versions this phrase completes the first half of verse 33, yet in another version (NIV) this phrase is the beginning of verse 34, which introduces verses 34-36. In the case of the Russian Synod Version, this phrase stands alone. The translators added the word, "быва́ть," which looks back to the previous sentence, implying that the "peace" is "to be present" in all of the churches of the saints. Because of these different translations, this begs the question: "Should this phrase be the conclusion of verse 33 or the introduction to verse 34?" Paul's statement, "for God is not a *God* of confusion but of peace," coincides with the previous context in relationship to the tongue speakers and the prophets. But for Paul to add the phrase to that context, "as in all the churches of the saints," seems to be overstating the obvious. It does not seem like a logical statement for Paul to add to the previous context. On the other hand, if this phrase was meant to be the introduction to verse 34 as the New International Version has translated it, then the construction makes perfect sense. Therefore this passage would state: "As in all the church-

es of the saints, 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. 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." Not only is this construction acceptable in the Greek text, it also reflects Paul's previous exhortation to the women of Corinth in 1 Corinthians 11:16 ("But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God."). Paul, in both passages, wanted to make it clear that what he was telling the women of Corinth was not written just to them, but was common, acceptable behavior for all women in all of God's churches.

Understanding the passage (verse 34):

The difficulty comes when interpreting verses 34 and 35. What does it mean that women are to keep silent in the church and are not permitted to speak? Why is it improper if they do speak, and why are they to question their husbands at home? How narrow are these commands, and how are they to be interpreted today?

Often people refer to 1 Corinthians 11 as proof that women can speak publicly in the church service for it speaks about women praying and prophesying. The assumption of course is that the context of this passage pertains to the gathering of the church. If this is the case, then there definitely seems to be a contradiction between these two chapters. Yet, from the author's study of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, there is no convincing proof that the greater context is the gathering of the church. Actually, because of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 ("A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness...to remain quiet"), the author believes to the contrary that women were not allowed to lead the church in prayer and/or prophesy publicly. There is no indication anywhere in the Scriptures that a woman was ever allowed to lead a gathering of the church.

If a prophetess did not publicly use her gift, then when did she prophesy (cf. Acts 21:9)? The ministry of a prophetess was a nonpublic ministry such as that of Huldah (cf. 2 Kings 22:14-20) and Anna (cf. Luke 2:36-38). They conveyed revelation from God privately to those God desired. This makes the most sense as one looks at the whole of Scripture and understands the biblical role of women. Practically, for a woman to have prophesied publicly to the church, she would have been in a role of authority ("thus says the Lord") and teaching, both of which Paul clearly stated is forbidden for women to do, for they were "to remain quiet" (1 Tim. 2:12). This coincides with the guidelines given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 for the worship service. There he stated that only two or three prophets were allowed to speak, but prophetesses are not mentioned (14:29-32). Further support for this view is found in Ephesians 4:11-16. In this passage, four offices of leadership were given by Christ to the church. The purpose of these offices were for the equipping and building up of the body of Christ (see the article titled, "Pastor's Equipping Ministry"). Due to the nature of these offices they could only be held by men because to be able to carry out the necessary tasks of these offices the people in them would have to teach and be in authority over the entire church.

Were women allowed to pray publicly in a church service according to 1 Corinthians 11? The underlying issue of 1 Corinthians 11 is submission. In that chapter Paul talked about God's divine and created order, which are the reasons for submission and why women are not to lead the church. This would include leading it in

prayer (see the appendix article titled, "Head Coverings"). This is the responsibility of men (contrast verse 8 of 1 Timothy 2 with verses 9-14), specifically of the pastor and elders. Therefore, women are to keep silent in the church service and "are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says" (1 Cor. 14:34). What does the Law say about this? Genesis 2:20 states that God made Eve as a helper for Adam (submission is implied in this statement). Genesis 3:16 states that as a result of the curse, though women will desire to rule over their husbands, their husbands will rule over them (submission is also implied). Therefore the Law spoke about the underlying principle of subjection but not specifically whether a woman could or could not speak publicly in a religious gathering (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3; 14:34; Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 2:11,12; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6).

Understanding the passage (verse 35):

The issue in 1 Corinthians 14 about why women were to keep silent in the church becomes more apparent in verse 35. There Paul said: "If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home." Why would Paul say this after stating that women are to keep quiet in the church? How does this phrase fit the context? Whereas verse 34 is a general statement about women not speaking and thus usurping the role of men in the church (cf. 1 Tim. 2:12), verse 35 addresses the specific problem which concerns the prophets (vss. 29-32). In context, Paul just concluded discussing the ministry of the prophets. After a prophet spoke, the "others" were to pass judgment on what he said, discerning if what was spoken was of the Holy Spirit or not. Who were the "others"? Were they the other prophets? The church leaders? The men of the church? One very strong indication that this is a reference to all the men of the church is found in verse 37. There Paul stated: "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment." Paul was telling his readers that if they believed they were prophets or spiritual, they were to pass judgment on what he had written in this epistle; and in so doing they would know that it was the Lord's commandment. This is what the "others" were to do after the prophets spoke. But please note that Paul did not say that if they were prophets or spiritual, but if they believed they were prophets or spiritual, they were to pass judgment. This broader statement then allows for not only true prophets and spiritual leaders to pass judgment, but for all the men of the church. Therefore, if men thought themselves spiritually minded, they could pass judgment.

Practically, how did this process of judgment take place? All indications are that during the services of the church there was a time when questions were allowed to be asked of the speaker (i.e., prophet, pastor). It was during this time of passing judgment that the problem arose which Paul addressed in this passage. It seems that the women were questioning the speakers. This is a logical conclusion when considering the fact that only women were prohibited from speaking in the church and not men. If women wanted clarification of those things spoken in church, they were to ask their husbands at home. Therefore what seems to have been occurring in the Corinthian church was that the women were questioning the prophets (and maybe other men who delivered messages as well) about what they had taught. Paul said that this was improper, or in other words, it was disgraceful. This was a very strong reprimand for the women. He made it clear that this behavior was not acceptable. Only the men could clarify things which were spoken in the church service, passing judgment upon them.

Having the ability to question the speakers was important for at least two reasons during that time of church history. The first is that it helped the church to stay pure from false teachers by making sure that what they said was of the Holy Spirit, especially when they claimed to be apostles and prophets (cf. Acts 13:6; 2 Cor. 11:13; 2 Pet. 2:1). The second reason this would have been a very important aspect of the service was because much of the New Testament was unavailable. Actually the majority of the people could not even afford single books of the Old Testament, let alone the Old Testament in its entirety. Only the very rich could afford those things (e.g., the Ethiopian eunuch; Acts 8:28). Therefore in the church services, the people in attendance were receiving from the prophets oral revelation from God. Once what was said was judged as truth from God by the men of the church, the husband as the head of his home was then responsible to learn, understand, and then teach that to his wife and children at home (cf. Deut. 4:9-10; 6:4-7, 20-25; 11:18-19; Psa. 78:1-8; Eph. 6:4; Eph 5:24). Also, since everything in the church service was to be done in order (1 Cor. 14:40), having just men ask questions with the goal of teaching their families at home would facilitate this process. Since "a woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness" (1 Tim. 2:11), she was not allowed to question the speakers publicly.

Understanding further context:

Paul then ended this portion of the passage by reminding the Corinthians that they were to obey the word they had received (vs. 36). The Word of God did not originate from them, and it was not given only to them. Therefore, if they were spiritual, they would understand that Paul's words were God's commandment (vs. 37). If they did not recognize this fact, then they would not be recognized (vs. 38); the implication is by God and the church (cf. Mat. 18:19-20; Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; 2 Thes. 3:14). Paul then concluded the chapter by stating that they as a church should desire prophesy in their midst, although those gifted with tongues should not be forbidden to speak (vs. 39). "But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner" (vs. 40).

Concluding remarks:

In conclusion, the believer ought to understand the proper application of this passage. The context is church order, and Paul wanted all things to be done in an orderly manner. One aspect of church order Paul focused on was a command given by God (vs. 34) -- that women were not to speak in the church in a role of authority or to ask questions publicly of those who did (e.g., such as the prophets). This was the role of their husbands. It was also improper for women to be in a role of church leadership. Single and widowed women were also not allowed to do these things. Although they did not have husbands who were in authority over them, they could ask their fathers; or if that was not possible, other men who were in attendance, but only after the service.

Since most churches today do not have this kind of interaction during a service between the pastor and the people of his church, women speaking in the church is really not a major issue in most places in the world. Although this is the case, in church services women are to subject themselves to the men who are their head.

Can women ever speak in the church? In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul said: "...When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation..." The words, "each one," implies the idea of all of the believers present, including women. Since the psalms were poetry and songs, it could be assumed that the women were allowed to read a psalm or even sing (cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), though the others things listed (teaching, prophesying, speaking in a tongue or interpretation) were specifically for the men of the church due to the nature of each gift. First Corinthians 14 does not seem to prevent women from praying publicly outside of the main gathering of the church or asking questions publicly in such gatherings as prayer groups, Bible studies, etc. This passage is talking about the gathering of the church for the main church services (see the appendix article titled, "Church Defined"). Therefore, it seems that women are allowed more freedom in other gatherings.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:



1. Does your church allow women to lead any portion of your worship services (e.g., worship leader, choir director, etc.)? Will you make any changes in this practice?
2. Do women ever speak out inappropriately in the services of your church services? What will your response be to this in the future?
3. Are women allowed to lead the church services in prayer? Is this appropriate?
4. Considering 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15, does God desire women to be pastors, elders, or leaders in the local church? Please explain your answer using these passages.

Please note: If your church needs to make changes in regards to the role of women, please do so in love, with humility, and in a way that no one is embarrassed. Keep in mind the article presented within this manual titled, "Women's Roles Defined." Women are equal to men in the eyes of God, although they do have different roles and levels of responsibility. God loves and cares for them dearly, and so should the church leaders and men of the church. They, like you, are fellow heirs of the grace of life; therefore show them the honor that they deserve so that your prayers will not be hindered" (cf. 1 Pet. 3:7).

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARIES AND CHURCH PLANTERS:

1. As you lay the foundation for your new church, it will be important to lay a foundation which is biblical, fulfills the desires of God, and yet does not overstep them. In other words, though women are to keep silent in the church as defined in this article, please remember that they are important to the church and its function. What can you do to make sure that your church does not demean them simply because their role and level of responsibility is different than men's?

2. Women keeping silent in the church goes against the spirit of the world in which the church exists. What can you do to foster such submission by the women of your church when the culture in which they live tells them that this is unacceptable behavior, archaic?

3. When the men of a church are living for Christ and manifesting the fruit of the Spirit, their godly behavior creates an atmosphere within the church which makes it easier for women to submit. Why is this true? Why is this important?