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MINISTRIES

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Answering Atheists: Can Women Speak in Church? (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

Feminist critics of the Bible often claim that the apostle Paul was a misogynist who held women back and suppressed their voices. They will point to a few passages from Paul’s letters to support this claim.

The reason for this, is ultimately to attack biblical faith as a whole. If the apostle Paul’s teachings were sexist, then those who adhere to biblical teaching will inevitably participate in the subjugation of women. Biblical faith is harmful to women, so claim secular feminists.

Where do critics get this idea that Paul held sexist views toward women? People often bring up Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as an example:

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

The women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

At first glance, this passage certainly appears to demand female silence in the congregation. But is that really what’s going on here?

Think of the implications. This would mean that women couldn’t sing on the worship team. They couldn’t pray with and for others. They couldn’t be allowed to give announcements during the service. They couldn’t publicly read to the children in the nursery. After all, the passage says the women must “keep silent.” If we take these verses with a wooden literalism, those would be the logical implications.

With very few possible exceptions found in the extreme fringes of religion, no congregation today applies this passage as a universal rule prohibiting women from speaking. Is everyone violating Scripture in this regard?

We can begin to make sense of this passage by applying an important rule of biblical interpretation. As Tim Hegg explains:

One of the most important rules of Bible interpretation is to compare Scripture with Scripture. Not every passage is self-interpretative. The whole of Scripture must shed light on the individual parts. This is particularly true when it appears that one passage contradicts another.

-Tim Hegg, *The Role of Women in the Messianic Assembly* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 1988), p. 32

This passage is undoubtedly in tension with many other parts of the Bible. There are other passages of Scripture that clearly allow women to speak, sing, prophesy, and so forth, in the congregation.

For instance, how can women like Prisca (Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19), Junia (Romans 16:7), and Tryphosa (Romans 16:12) serve as co-workers in the congregations if they weren't allowed to speak in those congregations? How can Phoebe serve as a deacon (Romans 16:1-2) if she can't talk in the church?

Not only that, but also just a few chapters earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul mentions women praying and prophesying in the congregation (1 Corinthians 11:5). Since Paul defines prophecy as a spiritual gift intended to edify and instruct the body of believers (1 Corinthians 14:4; 31), which would involve speaking, it seems clear that women were doing such things in the congregation—and Paul was okay with it.

Furthermore, the context of these verses is when “the whole church comes together” (1 Corinthians 14:23). These gatherings involved the people bringing “a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (1 Corinthians 14:26).

In summary:

- There are examples of women functioning in ministry roles that would require them to speak in church.
- Paul directly mentions that women were permitted to pray and prophesy in church.
- The context of the verses in question assumes “the whole church,” which would include women, was involved in bringing “a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” to the gatherings.

Given these facts, it seems clear that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 cannot be a general command for female silence in the congregation. Something more must be going on here. Why would Paul give these instructions for women to keep silent?

Since this cannot be a general rule based on the fact that women were permitted to speak in other passages, Paul must be addressing a specific situation. Let's consider the context.

Paul's goal in chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians was to instruct the Corinthian church in how to administer orderly worship services:

1 Corinthians 14:39-40

So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order.

In light of this objective, there are some things to take note of in the chapter. First, Paul tells not only

women *but also men* to be silent in certain circumstances!

For instance, if someone speaks in tongues, there must be an interpretation, and it must be only one person at a time (1 Corinthians 14:27). If there is no one to interpret the tongue, the one speaking must “keep silent in church” (1 Corinthians 14:28). Prophets must prophesy one by one while others—once again—keep silent (1 Corinthians 14:29-30). These calls for both men and women to be silent do not mean complete silence for the entire service. The point was to prevent people from disrupting the order of the service.

We ought to interpret verses 34-35 within this same context. These aren’t general instructions for complete female silence in the church. Paul is addressing a specific situation. Again, whatever Paul is saying here, it is in view of having orderly services. So, the type of talking being prohibited should reasonably be understood as speech that was somehow disruptive to the service.

Scholars have offered a range of interpretations of these two verses and the problem Paul is addressing. Some have proposed that Paul is addressing a problem of gossip. Others suggest that there was an issue of wives interrupting as the other prophets were weighing their husbands’ prophecies. In any case, almost all agree that Paul is dealing with a localized problem, not giving some universal law prohibiting all women for all time from speaking in church. But since we don’t know precisely the issue Paul is addressing, we have to piece together clues to try to get an idea of the nature of the speech being prohibited.

One way we might reconstruct the problem is to look at Paul’s solution. He says that these Corinthian wives are to ask *their husbands* at home if they have anything they desire to learn. So, we might reasonably infer that these wives were *publicly* asking their husbands challenging questions, which disrupted the flow of the service.

In this ancient culture, a wife’s public disagreement with her husband would humiliate and dishonor him. Paul had already expressed concern about what outsiders might think if they encountered disorder in the congregation, like everyone speaking in tongues at once (1 Corinthians 14:23). Elsewhere in his letter, Paul also advises his readers to do what they can to avoid causing others to stumble (1 Corinthians 8-10). If some Greek or Roman came to the Corinthian gathering and saw wives publicly challenging their husbands, they might say, “you are out of your minds!” just like they might if they saw everyone speaking in tongues at once! The “shame” Paul speaks of would, therefore, not be women speaking in and of itself, but rather be in light of what the culture views as inappropriate—that is, wives publicly disagreeing with their husbands.

This interpretation would also make sense of Paul’s instructions that these wives “be in submission.” Feminists cringe at that word, but the Greek term for submission, *hypotasso*, does *not* suggest what feminists often allege—that is, women being treated as inferior slaves to their husbands. No, when the word occurs in the middle voice, as it does in the context of husband-wife relationships, it indicates the wife’s *voluntary yielding* to her husband. The wife’s submission is never forced by him. In fact, Scripture explicitly commands husbands not to be “harsh” with their wives (Colossians 3:19). And in the same context that Paul instructs a wife to submit to her husband, he tells a husband to love his wife sacrificially—to protect, serve, and provide for her, putting her needs above his own (Ephesians 5:22-33).

Paul’s appeal to the “law” in this passage is ambiguous since nowhere does the Torah prohibit women from speaking at a gathering or even explicitly state that they submit to their husbands. Maybe Paul is

speaking of some secular law of his day? Or perhaps Jewish oral law? Or possibly Paul's use of law refers to principles he derives from the creation narrative in Genesis, as is the case when he speaks of this concept elsewhere? We can't really know for sure.

However, we can be sure of one thing: it's clear that this is not some universal law for female silence in the church. So, whatever view you take concerning some of the particulars, we can absolutely dismiss the feminist objection based on this passage.

If the interpretation we've proposed about the problem is correct, Paul's solution is perfectly reasonable. Out of respect for their husbands, and a desire not to disrupt the service or cause others to stumble, wives should ask their husbands their questions at home instead of potentially bringing dishonor upon their husbands and the congregation.

Our modern situation is, of course, very different from the ancient culture at Corinth. Society no longer looks down on women who are vocal about their opinions and disagreements at church or elsewhere, and that's great! But there is still an enduring principle here that all normal people would agree with: spouses should respect each other and not purposely embarrass each other in public! If there's an issue that can be better addressed at home or in private, then address it at home or in private. As much as you can, try not to cause others to stumble. Applying this principle will take different forms in different times and cultures, but the principle is still valid and true.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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