

Understanding 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Historically, two primary passages in Scripture affect our understanding of the role women are to play in the church:

1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 – “As in all the congregations of the saints,³⁴ women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

1 Timothy 2:9-15 – “I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,¹⁰ but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve.¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.¹⁵ But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”

There are two primary ways to interpret these passages. One is to start with these verses and hold them up and say, “**This is what the Bible says**” with little thought given to the context (Biblical, historical, cultural). And truthfully, that’s what many churches (including the Churches of Christ) have done and continue to do. We have tended to focus on isolated passages to establish authoritative practices and we have done this with countless issues.

So, if you take the passages in **1 Corinthians** and **1 Timothy** out of their greater biblical, historical, and cultural contexts and run your theology through them, you come to a certain conclusion about what women can and can’t do. It is what we would call the “traditional view” of the role of women. This view is demonstrated in conversations some of us have had when someone says regarding women’s roles, “Don’t we believe the Bible? The Bible says clearly in 1 Cor. 14:34 that ‘women should remain silent in the churches.’ It’s right there in black and white!” The word “remain silent” means just that – silence. The Greek word is *sigao*. It is an imperative in the verse (a command) and it means to “keep (the mouth) closed, to keep (totally) silent, to issue not a peep.” That means that if our traditional understanding is correct, women cannot utter a sound in the church. Of course, we don’t impose that imperative on women universally in all church settings. For instance, we allow women to sing and make comments in class. In many traditional churches women are very vocal in all settings.

The same is true for **1 Timothy 2:11-12**, where Paul says, “**A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.**¹² **I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.**” The word for “quietness” or “silence” in v.11 is not “total silence” as in **1 Cor. 14**. The Greek word is *hesuchia* and it means “quietfulness, to be controlled, reserved, and restrained.” It is the same word Paul uses in **1 Timothy 2:2** to say that *all* Christians should live peaceful and quiet lives in the culture in which they find themselves. The word doesn’t mean “silence” like **1 Cor. 14:34**. Still, Paul says “**I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man.**” Again, if we remove this verse from its biblical, historical, and cultural context, you can make the case that women must never teach or have

authority over a man. However, again, we are not consistent. We consider part of the passage to be cultural (e.g., “braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes” in **v.9**) and part of the passage to be universal (**v.12**).

In addition, the word “woman” and “women” in both passages is the same word usually translated “wives” in 1 Tim. 3:11 (“their wives,” Gk, *gune*). If the passages are interpreted to be “wives,” then the passages would not apply to single women. If the words are not interpreted as “wives,” then that puts our traditional translation/interpretation of 1 Tim. 3:11 in question (and we end up picking and choosing how to translate the word to fit our preconceived ideas or policies).

The point is that if we take these verses out of context and run our theology of women through them, we come to the generally accepted traditional (and inconsistent) understanding of the role of women.

Also, the result, in the thinking of some, is that we come away with the idea that God doesn’t think much of women.

The question is, “**Is there another way to look at these passages?**” And there is. We can start, not with the specific passages, but with the whole of Scripture and work our way to the specific passages in mind. In other words, we can start with the Bible as a whole and then begin to peel away layers (Bible, then OT & NT, then specific book or letter, then individual completed thought in the letter, then the individual texts). We also work to understand the text in its total biblical, historical, and cultural context. We also look for the purpose for which the letter was written. Then, we move towards an appropriate application of the texts involved. This is generally called “The Historico-Grammatical Approach” to scripture.

This is what we’ve tried to do in our study of the role of women. We started with the whole of Scripture and have worked our way in to the texts that seem to forbid a wider role for women to try to see these passages in their wider biblical and historical contexts.

So now we come to 1 Corinthians.

This letter is actually Paul’s response to a variety of issues he had heard about in the church there and questions he’d been asked, probably in a letter written by the church (the construction “Now about...” occurs several times in 1 Corinthians, e.g., 7:1; 8:1; 12:1 and serve as transition points as Paul moves from issue to issue or question to question). As is true for all the epistles in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians is an “occasional” document. That is, it was written for specific purposes and to deal with specific issues.

In **1 Cor. 11-14**, Paul is discussing what was going on when the church was together (11:18 – “when you come together”). They met in the home/homes of presumably more wealthy individuals since there was more room to meet. Perhaps several house churches would meet periodically to share a meal and the Lord’s Supper

He acknowledges that both men and women were praying and prophesying when the church met (**11:4-5**) and then speaks to the equality of men and women (**11:11-12**).

In **12:7ff** he states that every person in the church had been given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good and he discusses spiritual gifts. He says in **12:12ff** that every part of the body of Christ is equally important. The focus seems to be on the idea that ALL members of the body of Christ are important and ALL spiritual gifts are important. He begins this whole discussion with the phrase “Now about...” in 12:12. The Corinthians had asked questions about spiritual gifts. Given his full discussion, one of the main questions was which spiritual gift was more important (he focuses primarily on tongues and prophecy). In other words, the Corinthians had probably asked which gift was more important.

In order to maintain unity, in **1 Cor. 13**, Paul appeals to love as the highest motivation for their relationships in the church.

And then we come to the discussion of tongues and prophecy in **1 Cor. 14**. Again, Paul is dealing with their questions about spiritual gifts and in **Ch. 14**, he’s coming to the end of the discussion. Chapter 14 can be divided into two parts: (1) **14:1-25** talks about the issue of intelligibility regarding tongues and prophecy, and (2) **14:26-40** talk about issues of edification (what builds people up).

Notice the key terms in **1 Cor. 14**...(you can tell by the confluence of terms what the chapter is about)...

1. “Tongues” - chapter 14 contains 14 of the 19 occurrences in 1 Corinthians.
2. “Prophecy” - chapter 14 contains 8 of the 11 occurrences in 1 Corinthians.
3. “Prophecy” - chapter 14 contains 2 of the 5 occurrences in 1 Corinthians.
4. “Prophet” - chapter 14 contains 3 of 5 occurrences in 1 Corinthians.
5. “Edification” is mentioned 7 times in chapter 14 (14:3, 4 [2 times], 5, 12, 17, 26).

Paul is talking primarily about how prophecy and tongues edify or strengthen or build up or encourage the church (or do not do so).

And then we get to the last part of **1 Cor. 14:26-40** which contains the verses about women being silent. There’s a complete unit of thought here that’s bracketed by two verses (it’s called an “inclusio” by scholars – these verses function like bookends to the completed thought):

1 Corinthians 14:26 – “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. *All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.*”

And **1 Corinthians 14:40** – “But everything should be done *in a fitting and orderly way*” (KJV – “decently and in order”).

So the primary focus of what Paul is talking about is how to do things in an orderly and edifying kind of way.

In between these two verses, if you go through and count the number of commands (imperatives), you discover there are 14 commands in 15 verses (14:26, 27, 28 [2 commands], 29 [2 commands], 30, 34 [2 commands], 35, 37, 39 [2 commands], 40). So you get the sense that we've come to the end of an argument that stretched from Ch. 12 to Ch. 14, and now, Paul is saying, **“OK, now, here's what I want you to DO. We've talked about the foundations and we've connected what you do to love, so now, here's what to DO so you can strengthen and edify the whole church.”** And Paul fires off these 14 commands.

You can outline 1 Cor. 14:26-40 like this:

- Theme – Tongues and Prophecy are done for the strengthening of the church (**14:26**)
- General instructions for the proper use of tongues (**14:27-28**)
- General instructions for the proper use of prophecy (**14:29-33**)
- Specific directions to women for orderly use of tongues and prophecy (**14:34-35**)
- Concluding Remarks (with the concluding remark that everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way) (**14:36-40**)

We'll look at each in turn.

14:27-28 – General Instructions of Tongues.

Paul says, **“If anyone speaks in a tongue, two--or at the most three--should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.”**²⁸ **If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.”** In v. 27, Paul first communicates the number of tongue-speakers who should speak (“two – or at the most three”). Second, he focuses on the manner in which tongue speakers should speak (“one at a time”). Third, he states what should accompany tongue-speaking (“someone must interpret”). Last, in v. 28, he mentions a modifier in case something happens (“If there is no interpreter”). If there is no one to interpret, Paul says “the speaker should *keep quiet* in the church.” Literally, Paul says the speaker should “be silent.” The verb is *sigao*, the same verb that occurs in v. 34 regarding women. If there is no interpreter, the tongue-speaker should “shut up” or “utter not a sound.” If the tongue-speaker insists on speaking, he should do so silently (“the speaker should speak to himself and God”). In other words, the tongue-speaker should keep the utterance/speech between him/herself and God.

14:29-33 - General instructions for the proper use of prophecy.

In vv. 29-33 when Paul addresses prophecy, there is a very similar construction to vv. 27-28. What Paul says is not exactly in the same order, but you have the same items or elements.

“Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.”³⁰ **And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop.**³¹ **For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.**³² **The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.**³³ **For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints...** First, Paul addresses the number of prophetesiers (v. 29 - “two or three prophets should speak”). Second, Paul

focuses on what should accompany prophecy (v. 29 - “the others should weigh carefully what is said”). Next comes the modifier (v. 30 - “if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down”). In this case, if a new revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should *stop*. The verb translated *stop* in v. 30 is *sigao* – literally, the first speaker should *be silent* – “shut up, not utter another word.” This again is the *exact same verb* used to address the tongue-speakers in v. 28 and the women in v. 34. Paul also addresses the manner in which prophecy should take place (“you can all prophesy in turn,” literally: “one by one”).

So far, this is the same information as for tongue speakers; but Paul gives even more information for prophets. In v. 31 he addresses the purpose of prophecy (“...so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged”). There’s more information about the purpose of prophecy in 14:3 – prophecy is for the *strengthening, encouragement, and comfort* of the church. Also, in 14:5, Paul says the gift of prophecy is greater than uninterpreted tongues because uninterpreted tongues *do not edify the whole church*. In 14:31, Paul says prophets teach. All these verbs describe the activities of prophets.

Paul also includes an argument for self-control in 14:32-33. He states in v. 32 that the spirits of prophets don’t overwhelm the prophets (“The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.”) Why? Because (v. 33) “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.” In other words, God doesn’t give a gift that brings chaos and disorder. The gifts God gives bring instruction and edification and encouragement and comfort. So if your gift is bringing chaos and disorder to the church then you’re not using a gift God gave you.

14:34-35 - Specific directions to women for orderly use of tongues and prophecy

“...women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

For the last 5 verses (from v. 29), Paul has been discussing prophets and prophecy. So when we get to v. 34, Paul is not bringing up a new issue, he’s continuing his discussion of prophecy. It’s slightly different, but he’s still moving through the two main topics or Tongues and Prophecy (which actually go all the way back to Ch. 11.) Paul acknowledges in Ch. 11 that men and women are praying and prophesying. In Ch. 12 he talks about tongues and the many different manifestations of spiritual gifts. He mentions tongues and prophecy in Ch. 13 and calls them to let love motivate them. Then we get to this specific discussion of tongues and prophecy in Ch. 14. So when the subject of women comes up in **vv. 34-35**, this is not something new, it’s a continuation of the discussion he’s already been having.

And what Paul says about women is just about identical to what he’s said about prophecy and tongues in general. In v. 28, the tongue-speakers were told to *be silent* if certain conditions exist. In v. 30, he tells prophesiers to *be silent* if certain conditions exist. And then in v. 34 Paul tells the women to *keep silent*. Again, the same verb is used that was used in vv. 28 and 30: *sigao* – shut up; total silence. The point is that this isn’t something that’s surprising. We’ve already heard it twice before in the immediately preceding verses.

The question then becomes, is the issue *women* in general or is the issue the *manner* in which they were speaking? The verb “to speak” is used in vv. 27, 28, 29, 34, and 35. The verb is *laleo* and it’s a very general verb for speaking. So, the context determines the kind of speaking that’s taking place:

- v. 27 – “If anyone speaks in a tongue” (tongues)...
- v. 28 – “speak to himself and God” (sounds like a prayer)...
- v. 29 – “two or three prophets should speak” (prophecy)...

And so, in vv. 34-35, we need a context when we read – “women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak...it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” *In context*, the speech being addressed is what was just spoken of in vv. 32-33: prophecy (women prophets).

Instinctively we understand he’s not talking about speech in general, or else women couldn’t speak in classes or sing or say anything in any assembly. We also know that there were women prophets (prophetesses) in the Old and New Testaments and that Paul is acknowledging that women pray and prophesy when the church meets (Ch. 11).

So what is being addressed seems to be the *manner* in which these women prophets were speaking. In fact, in the Greek, when you use this verb “to speak,” you can use it in a couple of ways: (1) You can use this verb in the present tense, in which case it means to continually speak...on and on and on...you’re just a chatterbox...never stopping...it’s a continual action or (2) you can use the verb in the aorist tense, where it just talks about the action of speaking in general.

An illustration: Let’s say you have a child and you’re eating supper with a large group of people and your child is just chattering away, telling you about his day, and he’s just going on and on and on. But since there are other people there, you’re trying to have a wider conversation which your child keeps interrupting with his/her talk. You recognize that your child needs to learn that other people should be given an opportunity to talk and that it’s rude to interrupt and other people need a chance to talk, so you could say two things to your child: (1) “You need to not speak and give other people a turn” or (2) “You need to just shut your mouth and not speak.” And he would understand the difference! There’s a difference between your child speaking and speaking and not giving anyone else a chance (present tense) and your child speaking, but taking turns (aorist tense).

The verb tense in vv. 34-35 is the present tense. Paul is addressing speech that just goes on and on and on and ignores the needs of other people. So Paul is not forbidding speech in general. He’s forbidding the kind of speech that goes on and on and on and disrupts the group or ignores the needs of the group. So the sense would be, **“If the women prophets are just going to go on and on and on, they should be silent”** (just like tongue speakers and male prophets).

In fact, in v. 32, Paul says “The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.” The word translated “are subject to” is *hupotasso* – it means to voluntarily be under subjection, voluntarily submit. It’s the same word used in v.34: “...women should remain silent in the

churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.” It’s the same idea – and ideally our translation should translate the word in exactly the same way so you can see that it’s the same verb. But our Bible don’t generally do that.

The point Paul is making is, no matter who you are, you can’t just speak in any way you want to in the body of Christ. And the idea is not so much that women are to be submissive to men, the idea is that men *and* women are to be in submission to *each other* when the church meets!

And then, finally, it talks about women learning in v. 35 (“If they want to inquire about something” - literally, “If they desire to learn anything” – manthano). This is the same verb for “learn” as in 14:31 – “For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.” (literally: “so all may learn” - manthano). So it’s not surprising to hear this language of learning, being subject, being silent, speaking – because that’s the language we’ve been hearing throughout this passage.

And the whole point of the discussion is reigning in speech that isn’t edifying or encouraging or helping people learn. It’s chaotic speech; it’s out of order speech. That’s the theme of the whole passage – we’re going to try to do things in a fitting and orderly way so people can be taught and encouraged and built up and comforted.

So apparently, the tongue speakers (male or female) and the male and female prophets (especially the female prophets) were out of order...they were creating chaos. If anyone creates chaos, they should stop. Be silent. Shut up.

That’s why the question of whether or not prophecy exists in the same way it existed in the 1st Century is really not the issue. The issue is, when the church meets, are the conditions that exist conducive to mutual edification? If anyone tries to monopolize conversations inside the convention of our modern assemblies, they are out of order and should “be silent.” If a student in a class continually tries to hijack the discussion which defeats the edification of the whole class, that person should “be silent.”

Four Options for Interpreting 1 Cor. 14:34-35.

A. 14:34-35 is a Quotation

1. Paul is quoting something some of the Corinthians have said.
2. **1 Corinthians 14:33-40** would then read like this: **“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the congregations of the saints. [You Corinthians – say,] ‘Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.’ [And Paul responds] ³⁶ [What?!] Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? ³⁷ If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. ³⁸ If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. ³⁹ Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”**
3. Pros...
 - a. The passage reads smoothly.
 - b. Paul often quotes the Corinthians in this letter (remember that this letter is in response to questions they had asked and situations Paul had been told about)...

-There are no quotation marks in the original Greek; their inclusion is always an editorial/translational/interpretational decision of the translators...the following from the NIV are examples of such interpretations:

1 Corinthians 1:12 (NIV) “What I mean is this: One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I follow Christ.’”

1 Corinthians 15:12 (NIV) “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?”

1 Corinthians 6:12-13 (NIV) “‘Everything is permissible for me’--but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible for me’--but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³ ‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food’--but God will destroy them

both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.”

-There are quotes from their letter to him: 7:1; 8:1, 4; 10:23.

-There are quotes from other sources of information available to him: 1:11; 5:1; 11:18; 16:17.

-So it's *possible* this is a quotation, the issue then becomes, “How likely is it that this is a quotation?”

-When Paul says, “You say” (or words to that effect, it's very possible!)

-In 1 Cor. 14:34-35, it's not nearly as clear...

c. Reading this as a quotation certainly doesn't raise any questions regarding reconciling 14:34-35 with 11:5.

4. Cons...

a. No other quotation in 1 Corinthians is this lengthy – usually they're just catch-phrases or quick sayings or slogans.

b. The traditional reading of 1 Timothy 2 is still an issue.

B. **An Interpolation** (That is, 14:34-35 is not part of the original text – some scribe or copier later on added this to the text and Paul never actually said it. This sometimes happens: Mark 16:9-20; John 7:58-8:11 are prime examples)

1. Pros...

a. The passage reads pretty smoothly...

1 Corinthians 14:29-40 – “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. ³⁰ And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. ³¹ For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. ³² The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. ³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints. [then leave out vv. 34-35 and jump to v.36]. ³⁶ Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? ³⁷ If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. ³⁸ If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. ³⁹ Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid

speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”

- b. There are actually some Greek manuscripts that move 14:34-35 to after 14:40, so there IS some evidence of Scribe treating those two verses as a completed thought unit and moving them elsewhere.

2. Cons

- a. Even though there are some MSS that move these verses, there is no textual basis for their omission; that is, no manuscript omits 14:34-35 *altogether* (I think that’s a deal-breaker).
- b. The text can be read coherently with the passage intact the way we have it.

C. **A Rule for All Time**

-That is, Paul is communicating a command/rule for all churches for all time that speaks to the idea of women speaking in church...

-Paul is speaking to gender rules and roles in the church and this applies to all people all the time.

-This is the traditional interpretation we pretty much all grew up with.

1. Pros

- a. The passage reads pretty smoothly that way...
- b. It also fits with the traditional reading of 1 Timothy 2.

2. Cons

- a. The prophesying by women in 1 Corinthians 11 is a problem.

-What happened between Ch. 11 and Ch. 14? Why did Paul change his perspective?

-Also this seems to ignore the other passages regarding women in general (e.g., Gal 3:28) and women speaking in particular (e.g., as prophetesses) elsewhere in the OT and NT and in the wider and immediate context (1 Corinthians 11:5 – “...every woman who prays or prophesies...”; 14:26 – “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, *everyone* [literally: “each one”] has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation [doesn’t that include women?]. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.”).

-Do women not have gifts? Must they be completely silent?

- b. Not only that, but a strict reading of 1 Cor. 14:35 (the mention of “husbands” in 1 Cor. 14:35a) is a restriction on speaking that would apply to “wives” only.

-1 Corinthians 14:35 – “If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

-If we’re talking about husbands, then “the women” in v. 34 must be wives.

-So, v. 34 would need to be translated “wives” and not “women”

-So none of this would apply to single women; they would be free to speak

D. **Specific Instructions for a Specific Problem**

-In other words, there was a problem that was specific to the Corinthian church. There were women who were speaking and speaking and speaking and disrupting the assembly...

-Before God, they had a right to participate and speak up and speak in tongues and prophesy, just like men, but they were abusing their rights and were creating chaos in the assembly...

-And so were some tongue speakers – going on and on and on...

-There were also male prophets who were doing the same kind of thing...

-And so Paul says, **“If tongue-speaking and prophecy isn’t going to edify and build up and encourage and comfort – if it’s causing more harm than good – then just be quiet. Just be silent.”**

A. Pros

1. The passage reads smoothly...
2. 14:34-35 fits the closer (1 Cor. 11) and wider (Gal. 3:28) context of Paul’s instruction and thought elsewhere...
3. It also fits the perspective in both the Old and New Testaments regarding the roles that women fulfilled.

B. Con: The traditional reading of 1 Timothy 2 is still an issue.