

# ***The Challenge of Women in Corinth***

## ***Reading 1 Corinthians 14:34-35***

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### **Scripture on a Welcome Card**

A person attends the Sunday worship of our congregation and is surprised at the participation of both women and men in leading worship. They fill out a “welcome card” and write on the back, “*Have you never read 1 Cor 14:34-35?*” The note indicates that they read this text from Paul as a clear, unambiguous ruling that women must not speak publicly in church and certainly not lead. When we look at the text in much-used translations, it is easy to see why.

#### **1 Corinthians 14:34-35 King James Version (1611)**

*<sup>34</sup> Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.*

*<sup>35</sup> And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.*

#### **1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 New Revised Standard Version (1989)**

*<sup>33</sup> ... (As in all the churches of the saints, <sup>34</sup> women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. <sup>35</sup> If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.)*

For all of us who honor the Bible as authoritative, the case certainly appears strong – perhaps even “open and shut.” In many churches the only leeway that is given to women’s voices is that women may sing (not speak). They cannot take such roles as passing communion trays or teaching boys after they have been baptized, though behind the scenes they may be some of the most active members of a church.

## **A Sense of Dissonance and Seeking God's Will**

Many know a rising sense that something is wrong here. There is an increasing sense of the church as the one place in society that silences women: Women all across the political spectrum fill offices of great responsibility. Women are as well educated as men, lead major corporations, serve as senior judges, teach men in universities and graduate schools, etc., etc.

But for many in our churches, these scriptures, as traditionally read and applied, stand as a wall against women's public leadership. If it is genuinely God's will that women be silent in church, it does not matter if a woman reaches any high office in government or business, she still could not be allowed to lead a public prayer or read scripture in a worship service. The fundamental question is: What is God's will as revealed in scripture?

The aim of this discussion is to affirm that the scriptures never intended to silence or disempower women in general in any aspect of the church's work, public or private, and that, on the contrary, it is important for the church today to make full use of the spiritual gifts of both women and men. There is so much that can be discussed – accounts of women's ministry, positive examples of women in scripture, testimonies of women in leadership, etc. But first we need an honest reading of scripture in a genuine effort to discern God's will.

### **Scripture as the Revelation of God: Reading the Mail**

The texts in the New Testament that are most often interpreted as restricting women are within letters. Most of the letters in the New Testament are responses to particular problems. The very nature of these letters means that we are listening one side of a conversation. In 1 Corinthians, for example, we read Paul's words, not those of the believers in Corinth. We often try to grasp the other side of the conversation – the views of the letter's recipients – so as to reconstruct what the letters are talking about as clearly as possible. Often letters allude to things that the writer and recipients both know about, but that are not described clearly in the letter.

The process always engages us as readers in interpreting what a letter says. We try to grasp what the writer intended to say to the original readers and try to make a judgment how that content as scripture applies to our own situation. Sometimes this

is a relatively simple and easy process. But often the statements or the situation addressed in a letter are obscure for some reason. The process is always challenging.

The very nature of the New Testament Letters, with all their built-in challenges, makes it hard to treat them as law codes or fixed systems of theology. Letters take us into the life and struggles of a believing community as the people there seek to internalize the Gospel and to be transformed by it. They let us hear the apostles as they deal with concrete problems of communities and as they guide believers to live out the Gospel within the complexities of a congregation of diverse people. That process takes place within an often hostile pagan environment that continually pulls on the believers to return to their old societal norms. But the pagan environment is also made up of the people that both the apostles and the communities are striving to reach with the message of Jesus and to bring into the community.

As scripture, the Letters are very well adapted for God's intention to shape a people around the Gospel of his grace centered in Jesus and his cross, but they are less effective in prescribing a definitive code of law and regulation. It is important to recognize that this shape of the scriptures is not a mistake on God's part. God knew what he was doing when he gave us these scriptures, including the Letters as a basic resource for understanding the Gospel.

### **Affirming Scripture in Ways that Undermine Scripture**

Christian history shows that there are many ways of understanding the authority of scripture that are not true to the nature of the scriptures themselves and that undermine God's purposes in scripture. One of the most important of these, as suggested above, is the common practice of reading the New Testament as a book of Law.

Reform theology has often followed what is known as the "regulative principle," especially associated with the early reformers Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin and later with the American Restoration Movement. This is the principle that what is not explicitly authorized in the New Testament is thereby forbidden. In some forms, it expresses the understanding that the New Testament is to be read as the church's legal constitution – as though the New Testament were written like the U.S. Constitution as a systematic and comprehensive code of basic Law. Such a view

stands in a profound tension with the kinds of materials that God chose to use in giving us the New Testament – Gospels, Letters, etc. – none of which take the form of comprehensive law code. The pattern of law code has to be imported from outside the New Testament and imposed on it.

The “hermeneutic” of reading the scriptures for “commands, approved examples, and necessary inferences” is a basic expression of that “regulative principle.” It usually functions as a method by which we take the Gospels and Letters that we receive and turn them into law books. The New Testament materials are sifted for laws and regulations that mark out distinctive and enforceable practices and boundaries for the church. The practical application of such a hermeneutical principle usually means a text is most likely to be read as a defining law in the following situation:

- (1) if it is explicit enough to define an observable practice or boundary,
- (2) if it can be universalized and applied broadly in the church,
- (3) if it is enforceable by authority structures in the church.

The traditional translation of 1 Cor 14:34-35 (“*The women should keep silence in the churches...*”) fits the above criteria well. The passage is read as a prescription of law removed from its context and universalized – as if from a law book rather than a letter written to give guidance in a concrete situation.

### **Does 1 Cor 14:34-35 Belong Where It Is?**

How should we understand this very influential text within Paul’s letter to the Corinthians? The traditional translation, going back to the King James Version and beyond, makes it very easy to separate the text from its context. Nothing in the context is needed in order to understand it or apply it. For example, in the Revised Standard Version (1952) the text reads:

<sup>34</sup> *The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says.* <sup>35</sup> *If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*

In the context of 1 Cor 14, this text really does seem out of place. The whole of chapter 14 from first to last is focused on a discussion of issues around prophecy and speaking in tongues. Paul urges the Corinthians to emphasize prophecy because *“the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation”* [1 Cor 14:2 ESV], and thus the whole assembly can be benefited.

In the midst of that discussion, suddenly a couple of sentences (35 words in Greek) simply silence women in the churches without any specific reference to either prophecy or tongues. Some ancient scribes even moved the text to the end of the chapter. Many scholars, including conservative scholars, have thought the text was a scribal interpolation.

Some have argued that the text is not only out of place in 1 Cor 14 but also in the letter as a whole because it contradicts what Paul said earlier in the same letter, in 1 Cor 11:4-5: Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, <sup>5</sup> but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head – it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved [NRSV]. Paul described both men and women praying and prophesying. He used exactly the same words in Greek for the actions of both, the only distinction being that men’s heads were to be uncovered and women’s heads covered. This raises a simple question: Why would Paul discuss what women should wear when they, like men, pray or prophesy, if he knew that a little later in the letter he was going to silence women completely and forbid them to participate in any public teaching such as prophecy?

These problems of interpretation flow from reading 1 Cor 14:34-35 as a clear legal regulation about women placed within a chapter that is about something else entirely. The NRSV translation notes these problems of interpretation by putting the section of these verses in parentheses, although it is not at all clear what the reader is to make of the parentheses.

### **Seeing 1 Cor 14:34-35 in Context**

In what follows, I want to argue that this text is not at all an interpolation, nor is it out of place. Rather it is closely tied to its immediate context. The traditional understanding of the Greek text represented by the most prominent translations comes from not recognizing the nature and importance of that context. The people in

the Corinthian community knew what Paul was talking about. But because churches in the decades and centuries after Paul did not continue the practices that Paul is discussing, the importance of those practices has regularly been overlooked or misunderstood. We can identify some basic issues by asking a few questions.

1. Who is the text talking about? The traditional translation's opening reference to "*the women...in the churches*" seems very broad and inclusive, suggesting that we should think of all women in all churches. In practice, the text has certainly been applied in that way to women of all ages both single and married, women married to believers or non-believers, and women who are widowed or divorced.

But in the next verse, Paul adds significant information about the women he's talking about. When they wish to learn something, he advises, "*let them ask their own husbands at home.*" By this addition, Paul indicates that, in fact, he is not thinking of women in general but is referring to Christian wives who have Christian husbands in the community at Corinth. The guidance to "*ask their own husbands*" could not meaningfully apply to women in Corinth who were single, widowed, or divorced, such as the various women Paul mentions in 1 Cor 7:7-11, 15, 34, or 37. Nor would Paul's advice be useful for women married to pagans or non-Christians in general, as in 1 Cor 7:13-16. Paul clearly assumes that the women he is describing have husbands capable of answering questions about Christian faith and giving instruction.

In this context it is important to note that in the Greek language, in which Paul wrote, there is only one word – *gyné* (γυνή) – that is translated either woman or wife as determined by context. But clearly the choice to translate the word either "wives" or "women" makes a great difference in English in how we understand the application of the text. If the text were translated, "*let the wives be silent*" or "*let their wives be silent*" rather than "*the women should keep silent,*" a new and different set of questions would be raised about the meaning of the text.

2. What is it that the wives are saying that must be silenced? The traditional translation of v. 34 ("*keep silence*" ... "*not permitted to speak*") can easily indicate that everything a woman says must be silenced. Again, however, in his guidance in v. 35, Paul clearly indicates that his concern is about questions that these wives are asking about "something they wish to learn." Paul says that they could better ask those questions at home to their own husbands rather than in the assembly. Paul seems to

be saying nothing about the kind of prophecy or prayer that these women might share in the assembly as they experience the gifts of the Spirit, as he mentioned in 1 Cor 11:4-5.

3. What does “in the churches” mean? Is Paul referring to all functions of all the churches everywhere? The word translated “church” is the Greek word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), which is the common Greek term for a public assembly. Throughout the whole of 1 Cor 14, Paul is discussing what practices of prophecy and tongues are appropriate for the public assembly of the community, especially when outsiders may be present. Thus, when vv. 34-35 are seen in their context, the emphasis clearly lies on what happens “in the assemblies” rather than “in the churches” at large.

4. What is the meaning of “shameful” when Paul says, “for it is shameful for a woman to speak”? Paul uses the Greek term *aischros* (αἰσχρός), meaning “shameful.” Who experiences this sense of shame? Why is it shameful for wives to speak here?

In Paul’s discussion of head coverings for men and women in worship in 1 Cor 11:1-16, he uses the same word “shameful” (*aischros*) in 11:6 that he does in 14:35. There, he clearly shows that in Corinth the issue of women praying or prophesying publically was fraught with challenges. We learn that it was considered “shameful” (*aischros*) for a woman to have her hair cut or her head shaved. Paul also speaks of a woman “shaming” her head if she prays or prophesies with her head uncovered. Similarly, a man shames his head if he prays or prophesies with anything on his head. Paul was confident that both he and the Corinthians shared and understood these sensibilities that were widely felt in Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture.

Similarly, it was considered shameful for a woman in that culture to speak in a public assembly (14:35). Like the shame of hair cut short, this was a sense of shame felt strongly by the people of their society, not in any sense a shame before God or a shame imposed by God.

The issue of shame takes us to a basic problem that arises at many points in 1 Corinthians. Because of their new life and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Christians were doing many things that could cause offense or shame: it might be speaking in tongues, or eating foods that Jews found offensive, or women speaking in public assemblies. Paul urges the Corinthians always to strive to minimize the offense so that

outsiders may not be put off from hearing the Gospel and being saved. See Paul's emphatic statement in 1 Cor 10:32-33.

If it was thought shameful in that society for a woman to speak in public, it was even more objectionable to show any sort of conflict or even affection between husband and wife in public. Two quotations from Plutarch, the famous first century philosopher, biographer, and moralist, illustrate common feelings about respectable behavior. Plutarch lived A.D. 46-120, just across the Saronic Gulf from Corinth and once wrote a small book of advice to a newly married couple who were connected to his household. He begins each item of advice with an illustration from history and then applies it to guide the young couple. In section 31, for example, he urges the young wife to avoid all speaking in public since it is like a woman undressing in public. In another section (13), he emphasizes how shameful it is for a husband and wife to allow any outsiders to see any disagreements between them.

Plutarch of Chaeronea, "Advice to Bride and Groom," sections 31 and 13.

[31] *"Theano [wife of Pythagoras] in putting her cloak about her exposed her hand. But when someone exclaimed, 'A lovely arm,' she replied, 'But not for the public.' Not only the arm of the virtuous woman, but her speech (logos) as well, ought to be 'not for the public,' and she ought to be modest and guarded about saying anything in the hearing of outsiders, since it is like undressing herself (apogymnosis) in public; for her feelings, character, and disposition can be seen when she talks."*

[13] *"Cato expelled from the Senate a man who kissed his own wife in the presence of his daughter. This perhaps was a little severe. But if it is shameful (aischros), as it is, for a husband and wife to greet each other and kiss and embrace in the presence of others, is it not more shameful (aischros) to air their recriminations and disagreements before others, and ... to indulge in admonition, fault-finding, and plain speaking in the open and without reserve?"*

Simply engaging these questions seriously begins to make us as readers aware of the complex dialogue that is going on between Paul and the Christians in Corinth. God gave us this teaching in letter form so that we actively enter this dialogue and are drawn deeper into the process of understanding.



But if one approaches this text confident that it is simply a statement of law, most of these questions are simply ignored in favor of taking the most explicit, universal, and enforceable parts of the text and making those portions into a general law that silences all women in all churches for all time.

## **Entering the Dialogue and the Teaching of the Letter**

1 Corinthians is a powerful and complex letter written by Paul to Christians who are former pagans and Jews brought together by Paul's preaching of Jesus. They love their new life and their experiences of the Holy Spirit, but many things have become distorted and misunderstood. Paul takes on topic after topic drawing them back to the Gospel.

1 Cor 14 is the last part of a discussion of "*things empowered by the Spirit*" (*pneumatika*, often translated "spiritual gifts") that Paul began in 1 Cor 12. There he emphasized that all kinds of spiritual gifts come from the same source, that all are important, and that the Holy Spirit gives those gifts as he chooses.

### **Prophecy and Tongues in 1 Cor 14**

1 Cor 14 is focused from beginning to end on two gifts, speaking in tongues and prophecy. See 14:1-2 and 14:39-40. These two gifts seem especially to be at issue in Corinth. Paul affirms both gifts but emphasizes that speaking in tongues is private, "*speaking to God*," by uttering "*mysteries in the Spirit*" – evidently a form of powerful, personal prayer (14:2). By contrast, Paul says that those who prophesy "*speak to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation*" (14:3). Prophecy, therefore, is far more important in church (that is, in the assembly, ekklesia) because it builds up a whole assembly of believers.

If outsiders come into the assembly when prophets are speaking, they will be "*reproved*," "*called to account*," and end up confessing that "*God is really among you*" (14:24-25). Whereas, if too many are speaking in tongues, that gift, which is good in itself, will be meaningless to them and they will "*say that you are raving*" (14:23).

### **Evaluating Prophecy in the Assembly**

Paul also gives us readers some hints about how the process of prophecy took place, hints that would have been well understood in practice by the Corinthians. Two

or three prophets would evidently speak in sequence, and then the others in the assembly would weigh or critically evaluate (*diakrinein*) what was said and approve it or perhaps reject it as not being true prophecy. Then other prophets could speak and the process would be repeated. Paul hopes that all the believers, men and women, come to participate in this, “for you can all prophesy one by one so that all may learn and all be encouraged” (14:31).

In light of what we learn in the rest of the letter, this process of evaluation was very important and must often have been a time of real debate and potential conflict. It was probably in these times of prophecy that individuals had first put forward many of the distorted conceptions that Paul corrects in the letter, but the assembly had not properly weighed, challenged, and rejected those destructive ideas.

For example, some person claiming to speak by the Holy Spirit evidently asserted that “Jesus is anathema/cursed.” This was perhaps claimed as a statement of spiritual freedom or spiritual authority: Jesus is unnecessary when the Spirit of God is speaking through us Corinthians directly. The statement was evidently not corrected or rejected in the process of evaluating prophecy. Paul thus finds himself having to make the seemingly obvious statement that “*No one speaking by God’s Spirit says ‘Jesus is anathema.’*” (1 Cor 12:3).

It was also likely in the context of such “prophecy” that some had claimed that there was “*no resurrection of the dead*” (1 Cor 15:12); that it was acceptable for men to go to prostitutes (1 Cor 6:13-15) and even that a man may live with his father’s wife (1 Cor 5:1-2). It was probably because of such misuse of prophecy that some came to have disdain for it. In writing to the Thessalonians from Corinth, Paul had felt it necessary to instruct them, “*Do not quench the Spirit, nor despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good, but abstain from every form of evil.* (1 Thess 5:19-22; cf. also 1 Jn 4:1-3).

The fact that the practice of critically evaluating prophecies in the worship assemblies went out of use in the early church evidently by the end of the first century made it difficult for readers of Paul’s letters in later times to understand the challenges that this practice posed and the ways it could affect the role of wives in the assembly.

## Reading 1 Cor 14:34-35 in its Context

If we try to read the two verses of 1 Cor 14:34-35 within the context where Paul placed them, many of our earlier questions about the text find answers. The passage is not inserted as a new or separate topic but is integrally part of Paul's discussion in the chapter as a whole. More specifically, it is a part of the discussion that immediately precedes it and leads into it. There Paul talks about the practice of prophecy, the evaluation of the words of the prophets by others in the assembly, and the importance of good order even when prophets believe that they are speaking by the Spirit.

The important practice of evaluating and sometimes rejecting the statements of prophets opened one obvious situation that had the potential to appear particularly offensive – even more shameful than a woman praying with her head uncovered and more offensive than everyone speaking in tongues. That was a situation in a public assembly when a wife might challenge a prophetic teaching given by her husband in the process of critically evaluating prophecy. Here the shame or offense was not inherent in what the wife might say, but was an expression of the strongly felt sensibility of the society that a wife should never oppose her husband in public. It was like a woman having her hair cut short or a man having his hair long. It was the sensibility so vividly expressed by Plutarch in his advice to newlyweds, quoted above, that it is shameful for a couple to air their disagreements before others, and especially for a wife to speak out. There seems to have been little corresponding sense of shame in that society about a husband speaking out.

Thus, care had to be taken. The gifts of the Holy Spirit led both women and men to pray and prophesy, to speak to people, as Paul says, “*for their upbuilding and encouragement*” (11:4-5; 14:3). But just as the potential for disgrace and shame meant that women in that society needed to wear head-coverings when they prophesied or prayed in public, so also they had to be careful in the weighing of prophecy.

The wives of the particular prophets who spoke should remain quiet and not participate in questioning and perhaps challenging their husbands' prophecies. Their questions may well be very important, but because such public questioning by a wife

was considered so offensive and shameful, Paul says that they should question their husbands at home in private discussion.

In this way the word of God that was truly expressed through prophecy by both women and men would not be made less effective in reaching those who needed to hear it because of behavior that was considered shameful.

Once the text is seen in context as genuinely part of Paul's larger discussion of spiritual gifts, the questions that seemed difficult to answer fall into place. What we needed was to take seriously the dialogue of the letter between Paul and the Corinthians and to read the text within the life situation of that community.

The principle that Paul follows is clear: When women or men are making use of their spiritual gifts, they should use those gifts to the full, but they should strive to do so in a way that causes least offense to the outsiders they are trying to reach. When their speaking did not particularly involve using their spiritual gifts, such as prophecy, but they were participating in shared questioning and evaluation, then the potential for offense to outsiders when a wife challenged her husband in public far outweighed the need for her to speak immediately. The wife should remain quiet in the public assembly and question her husband in a private setting, when she could pursue issues in whatever depth was necessary.

This text was simply never intended in any way to silence the spiritual gifts of women. Paul's aim rather was to empower women to be effective by being aware of the striking innovation that they represented in that society as they participated in public teaching and prophetic exhortation. The text was intended to avoid offense and help them to touch outsiders and bring them to "*worship God and declare that God is really among you*" (1 Cor 14:25).

In order to see the flow of Paul's instructions, consider the following non-traditional, but very literal translation of 1 Cor 14:26-36. The phrases in parentheses represent the shared understandings between Paul and the Corinthians that are implied in the text.

## 1 Corinthians 14:26-36

<sup>26</sup> *What should be done then, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things take place for building up (the whole assembly).*

<sup>27</sup> *If in a tongue someone speaks up, let it be only two or at most three, and one after the other; and let one of them interpret.* <sup>28</sup> *But if there is no interpreter, let them stay quiet in assembly and speak to themselves and to God.*

<sup>29</sup> *But as for prophets, let two or three speak, and let everyone else critically evaluate.* <sup>30</sup> *If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first person be quiet.* <sup>31</sup> *For you are all able to prophesy one by one, in order that all may learn and all be encouraged.* <sup>32</sup> *And prophets' spirits are subject to prophets,* <sup>33</sup> *for God is a God not of disorder but of peace, as in all the assemblies of the saints.*

<sup>34</sup> *The wives (of speaking prophets) should remain quiet in these assemblies. For it is not acceptable for them speak up, but let them act in subordination, just as also the law says.* <sup>35</sup> *If there is something (in their husband's prophecy) they wish to learn about, let them question their husbands at home. For it is considered shameful for a wife to speak forth in assembly (challenging her husband with questions).* <sup>36</sup> *Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?*

### Concluding Observations about “Women ... in the Churches”

As we saw at the beginning, most standard translations of 1 Cor 14:34-35 make the verses seem to speak about all women being always silent in all the churches. If the translation above is correct, how is it possible that so many fine translators got the text so wrong for so long? I want to conclude with three observations.

#### Paul is dealing with Real Tensions not Ideal Relationships

The first is that translators and interpreters often treat Paul's statements about relationships in the Christian communities as though he were setting out his own ideal understanding of how these relationships should be or even God's ideal intention for these relationships. It is certainly true that Paul's experience of the Holy Spirit and of Christians united across society's religious, gender, class, and legal boundaries, causes

him to push to break down those boundaries as much as possible within the life of the churches. But no Christian leader had power to change the Roman laws of marriage, the authority of fathers and husbands in Roman society, the laws of slavery, or many other laws and customs. Paul must deal with powerful tensions that are built into his historical situation and therefore into the sensibilities of the people in his communities. He is almost never describing an ideal society, as interpreters sometimes imagine.

### **Later Translators did not Comprehend the Situation Paul Addresses**

Second, if we put ourselves in the place of translators in later centuries, such as those in the time of the King James or even those in much later times, we can empathize with their difficulty. In their time, the idea that Paul would silence the wives of Christian husbands who were prophets speaking in particular assemblies was simply not a situation that they would imagine for Paul. It was not a category that fit their experience. The long-standing Roman-Greek-Jewish prohibition against women speaking publicly had long since reasserted itself in churches, and women almost never spoke in church. Why would Paul ever need to limit only wives of Christian prophets? It made no sense and certainly did not fit with their own patriarchal understanding of the church. Thus, they did not translate: *“The prophets’ wives should remain quiet in these assemblies...,”* but rather: *“Let your women keep silence in the churches.”* The second translation fit the reality that they knew, and by this translation, the ministries of countless women continued to be drastically limited. To this day it is often difficult for interpreters to place themselves back in those Corinthian assemblies and understand the challenges of a community that was moved by the Spirit to reach their society with a Gospel that was radically counter to the values of their society, and they therefore sought a path to empower women’s voices without alienating those who profoundly needed the Gospel.

### **The Practice of Silencing Women Reverses Paul’s Teaching.**

Third and finally, when we see what Paul’s aim was in this text, we can begin to understand how that aim can be fulfilled today. Writing in a context of severe cultural restrictions on women, Paul aimed to give full expression to women’s gifts of speaking to people for encouragement and exhortation in prophecy, of praying, and of speaking

in tongues without causing so much shame and offense to the hearers that the outsiders could not receive the message of the Gospel.

In our own day, we might imagine some areas in the world where similar cultural restrictions on women might call for a similar missional response. But in the United States and similar cultural environments, the cultural offense that can block outsiders from listening to the Gospel is silencing women. It is not in allowing them to speak and use their gifts. The same purposes and line of reasoning that Paul used leads to a very different practice in our time from what was needed in the first century.

Misunderstanding led to mistranslation and thus confirmed silencing all women in the churches. That common practice reversed Paul's intention to encourage all members of the community to participate in prophecy and thus to give full expression to the Spirit's gifts to both women and men. Rather, the silence has served to quench those gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to women. The church has robbed itself of the contributions to our upbuilding, instruction, and ministry that would have come through so many women across the centuries.

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