

## WOMEN IN WORSHIP

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### **Introduction**

About two years ago, a lady started visiting the afternoon service at our church. After two or three visits, she started asking some very pointed questions (our afternoon service is very informal and we allow for interaction between the congregation and the pastor). Eventually, the questions became arguments till one day she decided she was going to “preach” in the middle of the pastor’s sermon. Our pastor very graciously, yet bearing the authority of his office, let her know with no uncertain terms, that he would not allow her to make mockery of the worship of God. Later on we found out that she was a hyper-dispensationalist who felt called to rescue the church from the perils of covenant theology. This story illustrates how misguided one can be concerning the place of women in the worship of God. In addition, this illustration shows the need for clear teaching on the subject of women in worship.

There are three<sup>1</sup> major New Testament passages that deal directly with the place of women in worship. They are 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:33-35; 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Of these passages, 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 is the most germane to the role of the women in worship. Even 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 has to be understood in accordance with 1 Corinthians 14.

### **Interpretation**

1 Corinthians 14:33-35, “For God is not *the author* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but *they are* to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.”<sup>2</sup>

D. A. Carson suggests six unsatisfying, as he calls them, interpretations as summary of the position of the Church throughout the centuries.<sup>3</sup>

1. The demand for silence is absolute. In this case 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 would refer to informal gatherings or small groups and 1 Cor 14 would refer to the formal, corporate worship of the church.
2. Paul contradicted himself and there is nothing we can do about it.
3. What Paul really meant was that the women are to be silent concerning the order of worship. This passage says nothing about women’s submission to men.
4. Only married women are to be silent in the church. Single women can speak as much as they want.
5. There was a problem with the Corinthian women and Paul was so upset with it that he commanded every woman in every Pauline church to be quiet.

6. Paul is not stating his position. He is merely quoting from the letter the Corinthians has sent him.

### **A Better Interpretation**

Carson suggests that “Paul has just been requiring that the church in Corinth carefully weigh the prophecies presented to it... Paul’s point here, however, is that they [women] may not participate in the oral weighing of such prophecies.”<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 11, Paul already said that women also enjoy the temporary gift of prophecy in the church.<sup>5</sup> The fact that women did partake in prophesying in the apostolic church is also clear from Peter’s preaching. In Acts 2, Peter applies the prophecy of the prophet Joel to what was happening in the apostolic church. In verse 18, Peter says, “Your sons and **daughters** shall prophesy,” thus, putting his stamp of approval on the ministry of New Testament prophetesses.<sup>6</sup>

Although they could prophesy, Paul says that women cannot participate in the discussion of the meaning of such prophecies. This prohibition was universal (1 Cor 14:33b). In essence, what Paul is saying here is what he later told Timothy, “And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence” (1 Tim 2:12). Women are not to exercise authority over men and it is in that way that they are to remain silent. It does not mean that they cannot ask questions during Sunday School or sing during the morning service.

According to Paul, the basis for this prohibition is the law (1 Cor 14:34b). There isn’t a place in the law (moral, civil, or ceremonial) that forbids women to speak in worship. Thus, some suggested that this phrase is an addition to the text<sup>7</sup> because it sounds “unlike” Paul to appeal to a law that doesn’t exist. However, Paul often uses the word law as a substitute for the entire Old Testament (cf. 1 Cor 14:21). Yet, the question remains: what part of the Old Testament is Paul referring to? Many have said that he is referring to Genesis 3:16. If this is the passage he is referring to, then women are to remain silent because of the Fall. However, it is more probable that Paul is referring to the creation order in Genesis 2:20-24 since he did that in chapter 11 and in 1 Timothy 2. Therefore, the reason why women are to remain silent, or not exercise authority over men, is their place in creation as helpers to men.

This interpretation, rather than complete silence, fits better with the context of 1 Corinthians 11-14. It also puts New Testament prophesying and teaching in proper perspective. While women were allowed to prophesy with men, they were not allowed to teach men, which elevates the place of teaching in the church over prophesying. Lastly, this interpretation shows that there is a place for women to serve the church. However, this would be a topic for another article!

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<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that there are other passages that indirectly deal with the roles of men and women in worship such as passages that talk about the role of men and women in general. However, 1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:33-35; 1 Tim 2:8-15 have been recognized throughout history as the key passages in this subject. See John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> All Scriptures are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson.

<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, ““Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36,” in *Recovering Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, 145-151. See also the discussion on the textual problems found in the article above.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>5</sup> Some suggest that this prophesying was to be done in small groups or in private. However, the context of 1 Cor 11-14 is the corporate worship of the church. See John W. Robbins, *Scripture Twisting in the Seminaries. Part I: Feminism* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Hodge, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians disagrees with this conclusion. When commenting on 11:5, he says, “He is here speaking of the propriety of women speaking in public unveiled, and therefore he says nothing about the propriety of their speaking in public in itself. When that subject comes up, he expresses his judgment in the clearest terms, 14:34,” 208-209. Calvin agrees with Hodge and even calls women prophesying in the church a “vice” (Commentary on 1 Corinthians, p. 356). However, it seems unlike Paul to spend so much time giving directions on how women should prophesy in the church in chapter 11 and then completely forbid it in chapter 14.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Evans, *Woman in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983) 95.