**“LET YOUR WOMEN KEEP SILENT IN THE CHURCHES”**

I have not written anything on 1Cor.14:34-35 in a while, so I thought I’d do so now. The text says, “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” (1Cor.14:34-35, NKJV). If Paul was inspired of God (cf. v.37), then it behooves us to know exactly what is meant here, and how to apply it.

When considering these verses, one extreme is content to basically *ignore* what is said here, and put no restrictions upon women at all – even “in church.” There is no attempt to properly apply these verses in our day, due to some alleged societal ignorance, male-dominated culture, or sexism. Thus, women may preach to men, and serve as elders or deacons in a local church. But this view is untenable (cf. 1Tm.2:8-15; 3:1-13).

The other extreme takes the words “women keep silent in the churches,” and “it is shameful for women to speak in church” as *absolute* statements, devoid of any context. Those holding this view argue that women may not teach a Bible class of women or children; or even so much as make a comment or ask a question in a Bible class. I believe the truth is somewhere between those two extreme views.

**First, Paul did NOT impose an absolute silence upon women.** Women are commanded to *sing* in church; and singing is a form of “speaking” and “teaching” (Ep.5:19; Col.3:16). Women are commanded to *confess Christ* before men, which also involves speaking (Mt.10:32; cf. Ac.8:37). And women may *confess their sins* to others, which will involve speaking (Jm.5:16). While I have heard of churches who would take women outside of “the assembly” to hear their confession of Christ or of sin, I think most can see the utter absurdity of such a view.

**Second, the words “keep silent” and “speak” are defined by context.** Notice: “If anyone speaks in a tongue” (v.27); “let him keep silent in church” (v.28); “Let two or three prophets speak” (v.29); “let the first keep silent” (v.30). In this context, it is clear that what these speakers were doing was *publicly and formally addressing the gathering.* It is in this very context that he says, “Let your women keep silent in the churches” (v.34). And this context (along with the previous paragraph showing that women are permitted to sing, confess Christ, or confess sin) makes it very clear that what is forbidden here is being *the speaker, teacher, or leader* of an assembly where men are present.

**Third, the women’s speaking is contrasted with being “submissive.”** Note: “for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive” (v.34). However, it is possible for someone to speak while maintaining submission! For example: in public schools, students can ask and answer questions while maintaining order and submission. Hence, Paul is saying that women are not to speak beyond the point of being in submission (cp. 1Tm.2:11-12).

**Fourth, the phrase, “let them ask their own husbands at home,” CANNOT be an absolute.** What if she doesn’t have a husband? What if she is not “at home,” but merely on the way home? Can she not ask the preacher? Can she not ask the elders? Can she not ask her mother? Of course, she can! This brings us back again to the *context.* The reason that asking their *husbands* is singled out is that these women were interrupting and/or disputing *with their husbands* while they prophesied (study v.29-35 very carefully). This showed that they were not “submissive” (v.34), were acting in a “shameful” way (v.35), and therefore were out of “order” (v.40).

**Fifth, the speaking being done by the women was called “shameful.”** However, we have already noted that *it is not always shameful* for women to speak in church. In other words, it’s possible for women to speak in a way that is NOT “shameful” (e.g. Ep.5:19; Col.3:15; Mt.10:32; Jm.5:16). It is *non-submissive* speaking that is “shameful” – things like *preaching* to men and/or *contending* with men.

I hope these brief thoughts help you to put 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 in its proper context.

--Lanny Smith