1 Corinthians 14:34-30

Women in Worship & Other Issues

# Introduction

There are a lot of controversial topics in First and Second Corinthians, but this batch of verses certainly causes some contention and should be viewed carefully in view of the recipients’ context; the chapter as a whole; the greater topical chapters of 12, 13 and 14; and the book as a whole. Proper hermeneutical principles should lead to a clear understanding as well as put the greater New Testament doctrines of biblical order in the church, biblical womanhood and cessationism in view.

# Gender Issues: Biblical Womanhood

34 The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. 35 If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

## Context is Key

We need to remember the context of these two verses is after a long series of passages on order and heavy criticism and correction for the Corinthian church that has covered chaos in the church service. Paul had already written that they needed to

* Speak clearly because it appears they were using tongues to the point of sounding like barbarians (14:11)
* Stop seeking gifts that were not edifying (14:12)
* Seek to speak 5 known words so that the body can be edified (14:19)
* If the church were to gather and no edifying truth were presented, but tongues was rampant those outside would think the church was crazy! (14:23)
* When the body gathers let the men share one thing that is edifying (14:26)
* Only 3 at most may speak in tongues, but only if there is an interpreter, otherwise the tongues gifted person must be silent (14:27-28)
* Prophets are to deliver orderly, evaluated truths (14:29-32)
* God is not a God of confusion, but of order

So while this passage may seem out of touch in a modern context due to the comparatively loud voice of feminism, we find that the *order principles* are what Paul is emphasizing and the focus is not on women being mute and offering no value to the body. In contrast the New Testament tells us about multiple godly women who helped serve the body and their own possessions and evangelism helped spread the gospel [Priscilla Acts 18:26, Lydia Acts 16:14-15]. Furthermore, we find that godly women are to be modeling godliness to those who come after them (Titus 2:3-5). The wives of deacons, and presumably Elders as well, are to be of character (1 Timothy 3:11) and exemplify the modeling in Titus and these verses here.

The New Testament focus is on order, honor, and carrying on a legacy of biblical truth. Cultural shifts and swings do not have a say in this order, but they usually shine a light on this biblical order and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christian women.

*C.f.: 1 Timothy 2:8-15; 1 Corinthians 14:28,30*

## Some Positives Within the Negatives

Paul seems to be encouraging spiritual growth and knowledge and a healthy respect for God’s order for the household in this passage. The language is constructed in such a way that growth is encouraged. Ideally a husband at home is spiritually leading his wife. Ideally a father is leading his daughters (and sons), and growth a regular part of the family’s time together. Ideally the submission that is described here is rooted and motivated by biblically specified love (c.f. Ephesians 3:14-21; 5:21-31; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8). This means that while there is submissive order there is an understanding that is deeply rooted in God’s care and love and not subjugation.

*How should single women be learning as they do not have a husband at home?*

### Observations from the Gentile Culture Surrounding Corinth

It was entirely common in the gentile world for a woman to be illiterate and staying at home. Roman women were able to own possessions (see Lydia Acts 16:14-15), but in marriage these property rights were given up to the husband. If a woman married a man who was wealthy there may be household slaves, but the poorer the household the more likely a woman would have to work. Wealthy widows would have been able to own property and to have the resources to act independently.

*How did these secular treatments of women contrast with biblical rules?*

### The Bible’s Household Order

Paul references the Old Testament Law and this order was something that was important, but it would have come with additional relationship duties for a husband and wife beyond her being quiet in the temple services. Man was made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26) and Woman was made in Man’s image (Genesis 2:22-23) so the Law established an order early on. However, the two shall be one flesh (Genesis 2:24) and there is no reason for a man not to wash his wife with words (Ephesians 5:26), to cherish her (Ephesians 5:29), to love her (Ephesians 5:25), to seek her growth and to see to her wellbeing. Paul in the above Ephesians references ties the principle of cleaving together – rooted in the earliest parts of the Old Testament – to the New Testament doctrine of the church being Christ’s bride.

*What are the characteristics of the “Proverbs 31” woman? How does this cross reference shed light on the sense of value that biblical womanhood upholds?*

*What do these verses not say about women?*

# Validity of Ministry

36 Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? 37 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. 38 But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

Paul again reiterates his having come to the church in Corinth with a message for them that they responded to. He is delivering to them corrections and care as an apostle. He puts the barrier for service in the body – not just for prophets – at agreeing with and complying with proper doctrine. If someone does not recognize the truth of Paul’s teaching then Paul says they are not recognized as leaders within the church. This is a critical part of Paul’s transition into doctrinal truth in the coming next 2 chapters.

*What are the core doctrines that Paul is concerned with for establishing a church and her leadership?*

# Order of Service

39 Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. 40 But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.

*How do we handle this statement that tongues should not be forbidden if we are also saying that tongues is no longer in operation?*

While we have belabored the critical understanding of cessationism we see here that Paul is telling the church in Corinth that they should not forbid tongues while they desire prophecy. The church then needed the clarity of doctrine that would have come through prophecy, and evangelism through tongues may have been useful, but the focus in the gatherings of the church was on Christ and edification. Once the gifts ceased operating you wouldn’t need to forbid their exercise because the Holy Spirit would not have prompted them.

This is in keeping with the Holy Spirit’s work to deliver a service that is orderly and not disruptive. If God is a god of order we need to reflect His character as we’re sanctified. The church in Corinth appears to have missed this message and their evangelistic message appears to have been hampered.

*Why does order in the service matter?*

*Does Liturgy address these concerns?*