

"The Sound of Silence?" 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36

Introduction

- Logic is a funny thing. Have you ever wondered why fire engines are red? Let me propose a theory. Maybe you've heard this before.

Fire engines have four wheels and eight men;
Four plus eight is twelve;
Twelve inches makes a ruler;
A ruler is Queen Elizabeth;
Queen Elizabeth sails the seven seas;
The seven seas have fish;
The fish have fins;
The Finns hate the Russians;
The Russians are red;
Fire engines are always rushin';
So they're red.

- Perfectly logical, right? Let's say you opened your bible to 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 and read Paul's words—maybe for the first time. And without paying attention to the surrounding words or without paying attention to the letter as a whole what would logic dictate? Logic would dictate that when Christians gather together women should remain silent. But that's just not the case—that's not what this passage is intending to communicate. Or to put it the words of [Lewis Carroll](#) "If it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic."
- For those with gender sensitized ears this passage has become a lightning rod. And because it generates so much emotion there has been a lot of illogical thinking about it. Paul's purpose in verses 33b-36 is not to prohibit women from speaking in church. If you'll remember from 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 women were praying and prophesying during corporate worship and Paul had no problem with it then. The key question is how to reconcile what seems like a contradiction just three chapters later.
- Numerous solutions have been offered throughout the centuries. Some suggest Paul stupidly forgot what he wrote back in chapter 11. I'm not going to even dignify that with a response. Others say Paul's quoting a Corinthian slogan, "silence the women!" and his words here are a rebuttal of that. But as [D.A. Carson](#) observes, "It is very doubtful that verses 34-35 constitute a quotation, perhaps from the Corinthian's letter. During the last decade and a half, one notable trend in Corinthian studies has been to postulate that Paul is quoting the Corinthians in more and more places—usually in places where the commentator does not like what Paul is saying."¹
- Others go one step further and say Paul didn't even write these verses. They say that because the words are so different from his words in chapter 11, someone other than Paul must have written them. Chapter 11 is the true Paul. Chapter 14 is not. They suggest that a scribe

¹ Carson, *Silent in the Churches*, "Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood," p. 148.

when copying the Corinthian letter added margin notes and those notes mistakenly crept into later copies on down the line. But there really is no solid evidence for something like that happening. The so-called “problem verses,” [verses 34-35](#), are found in every single Greek manuscript in existence which makes a scribal addition highly unlikely. Moreover, when scribes added comments to their copy work, which frequently happened, they usually did so to clarify things not make things more difficult to understand, which is what happens if verses 34-35 are a scribal addition. The fact that these verses are difficult to understand as written is actually a sign of authenticity. The sum of it all is that most interpretations are just plain weak at explaining why Paul says what he says, in the context of tongues and prophecy, which is clearly still the subject at hand.

- Paul’s chief concern is ordering the use of prophecy and tongues during corporate worship. He is not trying to put women in their place or disempower them. He’s not rebuking chattering, noisy, disruptive women. If that were the case then why does Paul silence *all* women—not just noisy ones? And wouldn’t there have been noisy, chattering men? Why doesn’t Paul say anything about them? You know what? He’s not trying to silence uneducated women either, another theory. Since Paul’s advice to the Corinthians is that they do what *all the churches* do, [verse 33b](#), if the problem is uneducated women, that would mean that *all* first-century Christian women were uneducated—and that’s ridiculous.²
- Paul is, however, offering more instructions about the practice of and evaluation of prophetic messages. That doesn’t mean that there are no important principles in this passage relating to men and women. There are. And we’ll talk about some of those things in a minute. But those things are secondary issues.

Transition

So what specifically does this passage teach? Given the context I think Paul is trying to teach the Corinthians and us that...

Proposition

- **Disorder destroys corporate worship**

Main Points

- This theme of the orderly worship and prophecy is peppered throughout this section. In [verse 29](#) Paul commanded the Corinthians to carefully weigh or sift various prophecies that were presented during corporate worship. *Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.* And then the big theological principle in [verse 33](#). *God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace.* And then the bow on the package that wraps everything up in [verses 39-40](#), *Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.* Simple logic—not fire engine red logic—simple logic dictates that these verses, [33b-36](#), which are sandwiched in the middle of an extended section on order and prophecy and tongues should somehow relate to those subjects. Something about their practice of prophecy was out of whack—disorderly. That’s the context.

² Carson, p. 147.

- If you'll remember, and you're welcome to flip back to chapter 11 and reread 2-16, the prophesying activities of the church included women. That's undeniable and it's biblical. Joel 2:28 anticipated it. Acts 2 fulfilled it. However, there was something out of order. Given the context of weighing and sifting prophecies in the previous paragraph, Paul's point seems to be that women may *not* speak when it comes to the oral weighing and sifting of those prophecies.³ Like a game of pinball, for women to weigh what was being said, that's pressing things too far, that's pressing on the table too much, you get a tilt—an out of order experience—when that happens. The normal practice of all the churches, *as in all the congregations of the saints*, [verse 33b](#), was for women not to do what the Corinthians were doing. The reason? [Verse 34](#), the Law with a capital L forbids it. Paul urges them to quit their disgraceful, renegade behavior and fall into line with the practice of all the other churches.
- My guess as to why the Corinthians didn't realize what they were doing was wrong has to do with some confusion regarding the public life verses the private life. In the ancient world social space was divided up; compartmentalized based upon gender. The male represented public space and those things associated with being in society whether that was leadership in politics, philosophy, rhetoric, litigation, business, warfare or the arena. If it was public it was a guy thing. The female represented the private space of the household. If it was private home kind of thing it was a girl thing.⁴
- In the beginning the early church gathered in public. Churches often started with Jewish converts from the local synagogue. Paul's pattern was to go to the synagogue first, win converts, and establish a church. In the beginning Christians often "held church" in the synagogue. And if no converts were won in the synagogue Paul went elsewhere. And in those cases the gathered church resembled the traditional Greek assembly. But both were very public. However, as Christians were kicked out of the synagogues, as persecution increased, the realm of church life shifted from public gatherings—the realm of men, to private gatherings—the realm of women. Churches gathered in homes—house churches. Look at 1 Corinthians 16:19. *The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.* I think there was confusion about whether the gathering of Christians in a home was a public thing or a private thing.⁵ I think the women and men in the Corinthian church thought that because the church now gathered in homes, the woman's predominant sphere of influence, that women were free to act and speak as they normally would act and speak.
- You get a clue that this was in fact the issue in [verse 35](#) where Paul tells the Corinthians in so many words that "church" even if its meeting in a home is not really the home—its church, there's something different about it. *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.* However, Paul's response to take the discussion home is not because the house church is a public place, which is really the realm of men, and therefore women shouldn't speak in church. If they had that in mind I think Paul would say that's thinking *like children*, 1 Corinthians 14:20. Instead, Paul appeals to something that transcends cultural views about the public realm being a man's world and the private realm being a woman's world. He

³ Carson, p. 152.

⁴ *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, p. 1130.

⁵ DNTB, p. 1131.

appeals to the Law. [Verse 34](#). *They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.*

- Let me say a few words about the Law that Paul references. You need to know that one of the objections to this passage being authored by Paul is that nowhere in the Old Testament does it say that women aren't allowed to speak—and that would be correct. Whoever wrote this it is argued supposedly forgot his Old Testament; got the facts mixed up. Or if it is accepted that Paul wrote these words by *Law* Paul really meant the rabbinic oral tradition that safeguarded the law not the Mosaic Law. I don't buy it. Whenever Paul refers to the Law, and that exact phrase occurs twice elsewhere in Romans 3:19 and in 1 Corinthians 9:8, whenever he says that Paul means Mosaic Law—Torah—not rabbinic oral tradition.⁶
- At any rate, when Paul appeals to the Law he normally quotes chapter and verse. For instance, just a few verses back, in verse 21. *In the Law it is written* and then he gives the quote from Isaiah 28. But not here. Why? Probably because he's already referenced the Old Testament passage in mind and doesn't feel the need to quote it again. Back in 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 Paul appealed to Genesis 1:26, he appealed to Genesis 2:18-24. And I think he had those same verses in mind here in chapter 14. He's referenced them once in chapter 11 talking about prophecy. The subject is still the same; he doesn't need to reference them again.
- Paul's point in referencing Genesis 2 is not that that passage teaches that women must be silent. But that because man was made first and woman was made for man, some kind of pattern has been laid down regarding the roles the two play.⁷ It should play itself out in the exercise of spiritual gifts within the church. Paul understands from this creation order, and that's the key, orderliness, man then woman—because of that, woman is to be subject to man—or at least that wife is to be subject to husband. As women weighed in and scrutinized prophecies this ordering of creation was being broken.
- And that's what was so disgraceful. *God is not a God of disorder but of peace.* The Corinthians forgot that because God was a God of order and that because mankind was created in his image there existed in creation an ordained order that reflected that aspect of his character—orderliness. The disgrace was not that women were speaking. Or that dumb women were speaking. The disgrace was that the creation order wasn't being carried over to the way prophecy was functioning in the church.

Transition

Given that **disorder destroys corporate** what can we take away from this passage? A couple of things.

- **First.** Disorder is disgraceful—especially when corporate worship fails to take into account the creation order. Men, when are you going to step up and lead? Not only lead your families but also help lead this: reading scripture, praying, teaching, you name it. We need more men. Women, please don't misinterpret me as saying you're not needed or that you're unimportant. I'm not saying that at all. You are very much needed. And we want you to pray and read scripture and to have a vital role in the corporate life of this church. But there is still an order that needs to be observed. Men have got to take the initiative and lead. Paul even goes on to say in [verse 37](#) that all he's written in this section is not his own opinion *but*

⁶ Carson, p. 148.

⁷ Carson, p. 152.

the Lord's command. Those are pretty strong words. And if we choose to ignore these words as it applies to our corporate worship we do so at our own peril and disgrace.⁸

- The **second thing** I think we can learn from this section is the constant and nagging temptation for all of us to reject authority in our lives. Look at **verse 36**. *Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?* In other words, “Are you the original church, so that your wisdom is to set the standard of propriety?”⁹ Are you the only Christians who can do as you please? It appears the Corinthians were trying to make up their own rules, perhaps thinking their own word or practice was sufficient or authoritative.¹⁰ How arrogant. They were so puffed up with their own so called spiritual thinking on the matter that they were actually in danger of ignoring apostolic authority.
- I’ve seen it happen far too many times in my still young ministry. People have problems with authority. And before you go ahead and tsk tsk the Corinthians, shame on you Corinthians, we’ve got to ask ourselves, all of us, do we have a problem with authority?
- There was a story in the *Associated Press* a couple of weeks ago about a man, who even though he was using GPS in his car, drove into an oncoming train.¹¹ Apparently GPS units don’t tell you when trains are coming.
- God’s word is the GPS. Through His word God guides and orders our lives but it doesn’t matter how good your guidance system is, if you ignore authority—whether that be God or His Word or the leaders he’s raised up; the end result is always the same, a disorderly, chaotic, messy train wreck. None of us, including myself, if we’re really following Christ can do as we please.

Conclusion

- The Bible reminds us of our tendency. *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.* But God’s good news is that Christ has taken upon himself by means of the cross our punishment of sin so that we might not be under the authority of sin but under his authority and lordship. By the way you’re living, whose authority are you really living under? Your own? Are you trying to do it your own way? May our lives reflect the peace of the gospel, peacemakers who have sown in peace raising a harvest of righteousness. *Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.* Amen.

⁸ Blomberg, p. 286.

⁹ Thisleton, p. 1162.

¹⁰ Thisleton, p. 1161.

¹¹ Associated Press, January 3, 2008.