

SYNERGOI

For we are **GOD'S Fellow Workers... (1 Cor 3:9)**

θεου' γάρ ἐσμεν συνεργοί

A LETTER FOR LEADERS

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Headship and 1 Corinthians 14 – Part I [Article #6]

There are two passages that seem to place limitations on the role women may have in the public life of the church. One crux interpretum (crucial passage to interpret) is 1 Tim 2. The other is 1 Cor 14:33-35: *34 women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35 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.*

Observation #1: Textual Evidence: Gordon Fee argues that 1 Cor 14: 34-35 are not part of Paul's original letter. Fee forcefully argues that these verses do not appear in the extant Western textual tradition for three centuries (but... we have no extant Latin manuscripts before the third century at all!). It remains that the earliest Greek manuscripts we have (and those considered the most reliable) ALL have the verses in question and that there is support for this reading in Latin mss as well. The standard annotated Greek NT published by the United Bible Societies have all these verses. The only variation noted is that these verses sometimes appear after v. 40. The overwhelming evidence is for the inclusion of vv 34-35 and the evidence strongly favours these verses after v 33. The UBS text lists no evidence for the omission. These verses must be dealt with.

Observation #2: Whatever 14:34-35 means, 1 Cor 11 establishes the fact of women praying and prophesying in public meetings, and 1 Cor 12 through 14 indicates that both men and women are gifted for ministry by the Holy Spirit. Thus it does not seem that 14:34-35 tell us about the authority of women who have been recognized and commended for public ministry (such as those in 1 Cor 11). This passage is dealing with a group of women, perhaps the wives of the leaders who were disrupting meetings.

Observation #3: Nobody reads these verses without somehow limiting their scope (either consciously or unconsciously). No one argues for the absolute silence of women in public worship. No one in the Christian tradition (of whom I am aware) argues or practices the prohibition of female singing or participating in liturgical readings in the public meeting. The sequestered pattern for women found today in some middle eastern countries is universally rejected by the Christian church. Regarding this point, Grudem correctly observes, "a principle of subordination in authority can be derived from certain OT passages, but a general principle of silence for women in worship certainly cannot be so derived. (cf. Exod 15: 20; 2 Sam 6:15, 19; Psa 148:12)." If the stricture here were applied without some implicit mitigation, it would disallow the participation of women in mixed cell groups, or Sunday School classes, and forget the idea of a woman teaching a mixed adult class or even a teen class of boys, and certainly participating in any mixed board meeting! Christians of Corinth gathered in house meetings more akin to our small groups and Sunday School classes than to our "Sunday morning service." Let's

be thoughtful and principled in our consideration. Here are some options that have been proposed:

“Let the women keep silent in the churches during the evaluation of prophecies,”

“Let the women keep silent in the churches when men are present

“Let the women who are causing disturbances keep silent in the churches

“Let the women keep silent in the churches absolutely and without qualification.

In the light of chapter 11, the last observation, *for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church*, must be limited either by the kind of speaking, the occasion of speaking or the class of women involved.

Observation #4: The instruction on submission is consistent with what we find in Eph 5:24: *Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.* [We will deal with this passage in a separate paper.]

Observation #5: In the immediately preceding context there are instructions on how the prophets are to conduct themselves: *Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. (1 Cor 14:29-33a)* Immediately following are more instructions to the prophets. The context, therefore, is specifically the “hearing and weighing the words of the prophets” and more generally the issue of good order in meetings. From the corrective instruction it would seem that the women concerned were asking inappropriate questions (v. 35) and were guilty of disrespect for their husbands. I suggest that “the women” here may be better translated “the wives” and I further suggest that understood should be they were “the wives [of the prophets]” for the corrective states, *If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home.* “The women” have husbands and therefore it is reasonable to here translate αἱ γυναῖκες as “the women” (Greek uses γυνή [gunE] equally for “wife” or “woman”). Note that Paul says, “the women” not “women.” This tends to support the idea that he has a particular group of women in mind. Further, the instruction indicates that these women are married to those who can answer their queries. In the context, it seems a reasonable conclusion to think that Paul has in mind “the wives of prophets”. Thus the sense of this passage could well be “the wives [of the prophets] should be silent during the presentation and weighing of the words of the prophets and should ask their questions at home of their own husbands. In the immediate context “the husbands” could well be “the prophets.” The resulting amplified translation would be something like the following:

1 Cor 14:33b-35: *As in all the meetings of the saints, 34 “the wives [of the prophets] should remain silent in the assemblies [during the hearing and weighing of prophecies]. They are not allowed to speak [just because they are married to a prophet], but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a wife [of a prophet who is not prophetically gifted] to speak in the meeting [during the hearing and weighing of prophecies].*

I have endeavoured to make explicit my best understandings and conclusions. Try your hand at it! More on this will have to wait until the next paper. To be continued... Pastor Phil

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