

Let the women keep silent in the churches-- What did Paul Mean?

by Dianne D. McDonnell (Arlington, Texas)

The apostle Paul wrote letters to churches to mediate in the problems of each church and set guidelines for them to follow. Many believe that Paul set up a rule that all Christian women must "keep silent" during church services. Some extend this to mean that women may not offer prayers, lead songs, read scriptures aloud or have any leadership role during or after services. To limit the women of God in such a way is a serious thing, and we must be very sure that Paul's words are being understood correctly.

We are handicapped when we read the letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth because we do not know exactly what events Paul was responding to. They knew-- but we have to read very carefully and ask in prayer for God to help us understand the situations that prompted Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians. Please take a moment now to pray to God for understanding and wisdom.

In 1 Cor. 11:13 Paul deals with a controversy about whether women should have their heads covered while praying and prophesying. Jewish women wore head-covering veils; gentile women did not. Evidently the two cultures were in conflict over women's head coverings, but not whether women should participate! He concludes that long hair becomes a covering for women who pray and prophesy publicly. Note that Paul's words here do NOT stop the women from praying and prophesying aloud during church services as some would assume.

Acts 21:9 reveals that Phillip the evangelist had "four virgin daughters who prophesied." A true prophecy is a message from God to a specific person or church. Would any minister of God refuse to let a woman deliver a true message that God had given her for the people of God? We have every reason to believe that converted Christian women such as the daughters of Phillip were participating in church services-- using their own God-given spiritual gifts, and Paul did not oppose their participation.

Yet the church at Corinth was having some problems that had to do with false prophets or prophetesses. Paul must deal with the problem without shutting down the church's access to the true prophets and prophetesses of God. It was a touchy situation.

The Key that unlocks the "keep silent" passage!

To understand Paul's comments in chapter 14 about women "keeping silent" there is one critical KEY passage that comes first! Many have overlooked it and read right past it-- but once it is understood the entire passage begins to fall into place.

We start in 1 Corinthians, chapter 12. Let's examine it verse by verse using the very literal New American Standard Bible. Brackets {**indicate words added by translators that are not in the Greek**} and parenthesis (**indicate the author's comments or explanations**).

1 Cor. 12:1-3

1 Now concerning spiritual {**gifts,**} brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

2 You know that when you were pagans, {**you were**} led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led. (**We realize that some that attend the Corinth church are still involved with pagan idols. He points out that the members were once led astray themselves. Paul leads his readers towards compassion and reconciliation towards those that are still unconverted "pagans" in their midst.**)

3 Therefore I make known to you, that no one¹ speaking by the Spirit of God says, "**Jesus is accursed**"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. (**Why is Paul making such an obvious statement? Doesn't everyone already KNOW that anyone saying, "Jesus is accursed" is not speaking by the spirit of God? Paul goes on to explain and defend spiritual gifts, talk about love, and finally reprimand women or wives causing disturbances in chapter 14. The only way the words "Jesus is accursed" fits into the rebuke that follows is if Paul is reacting to a specific incident reported to him that he needs to deal with. In these statements he is first bringing up the subject of what has happened in the Corinthian church! Misguided persons--still considered pagans-- have disrupted services with a false prophecy of "Jesus is accursed!" and opposing true prophets have countered with, "Jesus is Lord!" in reply!**)

Paul teaches that ALL receive spiritual gifts

Notice that in these verses immediately following the above verses, Paul is **defending** the concept of spiritual gifts

given to **every single** true believer-- both males and females:

1 Cor. 12:4-11

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.

5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.

6 And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all **{persons}**. **(Here he teaches that both men and women are given manifestation of the Holy Spirit --spiritual gifts-- for the benefit of the entire church, not just for their own benefit.)**

7 But **to each one**² is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

8 For to one is given the word of **wisdom** through the Spirit, and to another the **word of knowledge** according to the same Spirit;

9 to another **faith** by the same Spirit, and to another **gifts of healing** by the one Spirit,

10 and to another the effecting of **miracles**, and to another **prophecy**, and to another the **distinguishing of spirits**, to another **{various}** kinds of **tongues**, and to another the **interpretation of tongues**.

11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing **to each one**³ individually just as He wills. **(Paul is going out of his way to enforce that "each one" is given a spiritual gift/role or part to play in God's Church. God gives these roles as He desires-- only God can decide what spiritual gift is given to each man and woman! Paul does not say anything to indicate that "these public roles are the male gifts, and these private roles are the female gifts" as some teach. Paul is making it PLAIN that he does not wish to exclude anyone or anyone's spiritual gift, but verses 2 and 3 show us that someone-- possibly a woman-- has said, "Jesus be cursed", and this was not from God's Spirit! Paul warns them of the error of this message, yet also defends the rights of all true believers-- both male and female-- to participate in church services.)**

Prophecy and Love

The next portion of Paul's letter, chapter 13, is still on the subject of prophecy as he moves closer to dealing with the specific problem. He tells them that love is more important than prophecy as he tries to change their attitudes to loving attitudes to heal the disruption that has upset and angered their congregation.

1 Cor 13:2 And if I have {the gift of} prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (NAS)

Moving into chapter 14 Paul writes, "Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual {gifts}, but especially that you may prophesy."

Paul keeps returning to the subject of prophecy because the problem that he is trying to solve involves a woman who is falsely presenting herself as a prophetess. The daughters of Phillip are true prophetesses, but this woman is still "led astray to the dumb idols".

He points out that prophecy should edify the church, 1 Cor 14:4, and talks against speech that has an unclear meaning, a babbling, in verses 5-13. This unclear speech may relate to the worship of "dumb idols" in the city of Delphi just north of Corinth. People from all over the world came to Delphi to hear babbling that was supposed to be from a "god"!

Women or Wives?

We must also bear in mind that the Greeks had only one word for both woman and wife-- the word "gune"⁴. The same word that Paul uses in 1 Cor 14:34 is translated "wives" in many passages such as Matthew 19:8, "Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your **wives**...'" and many others including Ephesians 5:25 and 1 Peter 3:1.

So when Paul writes, "Let the women keep silent" he uses a word with two meanings! He may well be referring to "wives" who are unconverted and untaught-- the very one that "prophesied" that "Jesus was accursed" as recorded in 1 Cor 12:3. The church at Corinth would know exactly which wife or wives he meant! For us today, we must rely on context clues to reveal whether Paul was talking of women in general or specific wives.

Corinth and a woman minister

Corinth was a large seacoast city on the Gulf of Corinth, and its eastern port was called Cenchrea.⁵ This port area of Corinth was the home of Phoebe, mentioned in Romans 16:1 as a "diakonon" which is translated "servant" in this passage. This same exact word is translated "minister" in "is Christ then the **minister** of sin?" Galatians 2:17.

Paul refers to himself in Ephesian 3:7, "I became a **minister**" and in Col. 1:25, "I am made a **minister**" using the same exact word. Also see 1 Cor. 3:5, "**ministers** by whom ye believed", as well as 2 Cor. 3:6, "**ministers** of the new

covenant".⁶ This woman minister traveled to Rome carrying the book of Romans, and is highly praised by Paul. See the article "[Traveling through Time](#)" for more information about her. Since Phoebe was a minister from the eastern port of Corinth, it is a major proof that Paul did not restrict Phoebe and others from playing a major role in churches of that area.

Critical background information: The Oracle of Delphi

Just across the bay from Corinth was a major attraction of the ancient world, the Oracle of Delphi. On the southern slope of Mt. Parnassus, female priestesses presided over a stone temple and delivered answers for those seeking guidance from the "god" Apollo on everything from romance to whether to wage war. A prophetess about fifty-five years old would receive a question written on a lead tablet and would descend to the basement of the temple where she breathed fumes of ethylene, a sweet-smelling gas that produces feelings of euphoria. The gas drifted up from a fault line under the temple. Modern researchers have verified the presence of this gas and it can still be detected today.⁷ The priestess would utter "prophecies" while she was in a trance-like state, and these would pour out in a garbled state. Male priests "interpreted" these sounds. Interpretations were usually vague and ambiguous--increasing their chances of being perceived as accurate.⁸

The Oracle of Delphi existed for twelve centuries and was very famous in the ancient world. The congregation in Corinth was well aware of it and many probably witnessed the "oracle" in person. The unconverted mates of church members might still have been involved in similar pagan worship, as Delphi was only about forty miles north of Corinth, across what is known today as the Gulf of Corinth.

Control yourselves!

Paul writes, "For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted;" 1 Cor 14:31. Notice he doesn't say that all MEN may prophesy, but that ALL can prophesy if it is done "one by one". In verse 32 he adds that "the spirits of the prophets are subject to prophets"; meaning that true prophets are not out of control or in some gas-induced trance, as were the priestesses of Delphi. Prophets of God have control over their spirits and their speaking.

A God of Peace in all the churches of the saints

Verse 33 clearly illustrates that this entire issue was about confusion and disruption in the church, not Paul seeking to take away the rights of Christian women to participate. 1 Cor. 14:33 for **God is not {a God} of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.**⁹

Wives/Women keeping silent

1 Cor 14:34 Let the {or ***those**} women (the same word as "wives") keep silent in the churches {church}; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

*The Greeks have many forms of the word "the" but this exact word is "**hai**" 3588. In all the following New King James scriptures the same word in the male form --"**hoi**" is translated "**those**": John 6:14, "**those** men" ; John 8:29 KJV, "**those** things"; Romans 8:5 "For **those** who"; Romans 8:8, "**those** who are in the flesh" NKJ; 1 Cor 10:18, "**those** who eat"; 1 Cor. 15:18, "**those** who have fallen asleep"; and 1 Cor. 15:23, "**those** who are Christ's"; Gal. 3:9, "**those** who are of faith"; Gal. 5:24, "**those** who are Christ's"; Gal. 6:13, "**those** who are"; 1Thes. 5:7, "**Those** who sleep"; 1 Tim 3:13 "For **those** who have served well; 2Tim. 1:15, "all **those** in Asia"; 2 Tim 3:6, "**those** who creep". By using the feminine form of this word, "**hai**", Paul is saying, "Let **those** wives keep silent..." Not ALL women, just **those** causing confusion!

Paul is urging the churches to start a policy of limiting the participation of "those" wives, unconverted wives, who must subject themselves to their converted husbands, not causing any further disruption. Paul's reference to "the Law" may be a reference to Genesis 3:16 which relates to being subject to a husband in marriage.

Editor's Note:

Genesis 3:16 is a misunderstood scripture which some take as a command (law) for men to rule over women. This scripture is not a command (law) for men to rule over women, but is the consequence or result of what sin has caused to happen. Genesis 3:16 should be read as a statement stating a consequence or result of sin and not as a command (law) for men to rule over women in marriage or any other relationship between men and women. There are many other scriptures throughout the Bible showing that men should rule their wives/families as Christ rules the Church. Laura Lee

Wives with converted husbands

1 Cor 14:35 And **if** they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; ..." The phrase "**if** they desire to learn anything" expresses doubt whether these wives were wanting to learn. He implies they were just there to cause problems! Clearly Paul is dealing with specific wives because these being reprimanded have converted husbands they may ask at home. Wives with unconverted husbands could NOT "ask their own husbands at home, nor could unmarried women or widows.

He continues, "for it is improper for a woman (wife) to speak in church (the last two Greek words are-- **en ekkleesia**, which can also be translated **among the true believers**.) The Greek **en** is translated "**among**" in Matt. 27:56, "**among** which was Mary Magdalene" and Romans 8:29, "**among** many brethren" and countless other scriptures.¹⁰ Paul says that this unconverted wife may not speak **among the "ekkleesia"** among the **converted** male and female members participating in services!

The word "**ekkleesia**" translated "church" does not refer to a church building but to the entire congregation of Christian believers-- both men and women! **Ekkleesia** is defined by Thayer's Greek/English Definitions as "an assembly of Christians gathered for worship." It also means "called out" ones. This disruptive wife who babbles blasphemous "prophecies" is not a part of the baptized believers (the **ekkleesia**), and she is not to speak **among** the converted Christian men and women as do the women with the true spiritual gift of prophecy. The passage should be translated as follows: 1 Cor 14:34-35 Let **those wives** keep silent **among the called out ones**; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a **wife** to speak **among the called out ones**.

God only talks to you?

Paul's next words of biting sarcasm reflect his anger at this would be prophetess: 1 Cor. 14:36 "Was it from you that the word of God {first} went forth? Or has it come to you only?" This proves that prophetic blasphemy has caused this uproar, the false prophecy of 1 Cor 12:3 delivered by a woman acting in a manner much like a prophetess of Delphi speaking for Apollo! She uttered a garbled "prophecy" and interpreted it as "Jesus is cursed." To be sure that this woman who considered herself a prophetess accepts his ruling in this situation Paul adds- 1 Cor. 14:37-40 If **anyone** thinks he¹¹ (or she) is a prophet or spiritual, let him (or her) recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize {this} he (or she) is not recognized. Yet Paul is NOT limiting the brethren of the church, the men and women given spiritual gifts, for he tells the "brethren," the converted men and women-- to desire to prophesy! Therefore, **my brethren** (men and women of the **ekkleesia**), **desire earnestly to prophesy**, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. Paul's last words of chapter 14 show he is dealing with disorder-- and those causing it. "But **let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner.**"

A Curse on the person cursing Jesus!

Paul ends his letter with a threat towards the one who announced in services, "Jesus be cursed" mentioned in 1Cor 12:3. He concludes, "If **anyone** does not love the Lord, **a curse** be on him. (The Greek could mean him or her.) O Lord, come!" 1Cor 16:22, NIV.

No "Male" or "Female" Gifts

Further proof that Paul did not limit women's participation in the church services of the churches is found in this same letter in 1 Cor 12:28-31.

28 And God has appointed in the church, **first apostles, second prophets, third teachers**, then **miracles**, then gifts of **healings**, helps, administrations, {various} kinds of tongues. (Paul lists prophets second in the order of responsibility before God.)

29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not {workers of} miracles, are they?

30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

31 But **earnestly desire the greater gifts....**

Chapter 12 deals with spiritual gifts and Paul considers all the church offices listed above, apostles, prophets, teachers, etc. as **spiritual gifts, given by God, not man!** There is not a single scripture that lists some of these as "male" gifts and some of these as "female" gifts. Paul argues that each person receives a gift, and advises all to "desire the greater gifts"! Would he say that if any of the top five gifts were "off limits" to women?

1 Cor. 12:7 But **to each one**¹² is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Women are given spiritual gifts by God to use for the common good of the people of God. Paul did not take away

the right of women to use these spiritual gifts in services-- a woman with a gift of encouragement must be allowed to encourage. A woman with a gift of faith must be allowed to offer a prayer of faith. A woman with a word of wisdom must be allowed to publicly share her wisdom with the congregation. A woman with a musical gift must be allowed to lead joyful songs of praise. A woman with a gift of teaching must be allowed to teach truth. (See "[Paul and Woman Teachers](#)" for an explanation of the very misunderstood 1 Tim 2:12.) God does NOT limit His women. God sees women as equal to serve Him with whatever gifts He has given them to use for the common good.

If women are unable to participate during church services, then many are unable to contribute the gift God has given to them. Each spiritual gift is given for the benefit of the church as a whole-- the inability to participate in church services is like God giving a woman a beautifully wrapped, expensive gift--a present that would help her entire church-- and then telling her that she cannot open it! Would God do such a thing? No, He does not. Neither must men. To quote the words of Craig S. Keener, "...it is a dangerous thing to turn people from their call, or to oppose their call if it is genuinely from God."¹³

End Notes:

1 In this verse, The King James Version reads, "no man" but "man" is not in the Greek. The word is a form of 3762 "oudeis" meaning no one. It can include both men and women.

2 The Greek word used is "hekastos" 1538, meaning "each, every"; The King James is in error to translate, "to every man".

3 The word is "hekastos" 1538 each, every; The King James is in error to translate, "every man".

4 Strong's number 1248, meaning a woman or wife. The actual word used in 1 Cor. 14:34 is "gunaikes" the plural form.

5 Thayer's Greek/English Definitions, 2747 Cenchræa = "milet" the eastern harbor of Corinth (that is, its harbor on the Saronic Gulf) and the emporium of its trade with the Asiatic shores of the Mediterranean

6 Strong's 1249 *diakonos* Translated "minister" or "ministers" in Eph. 6:21, 2Cor. 6:4, 11:15, 23. Col. 1:7, 23, 25. 1Tim. 4:6 in the King James Version.

7 Reported in the Star-Telegram March 24, 2002, Page 23A, and Clinical Toxicology, April 2002.

8 World Book Encyclopedia, 1962 Edition, Vol. 4, Page 102.

9 Some Bible versions incorrectly punctuate this verse by ending it with a comma rather than a period.

10 See Matt. 2:6 "among the princes", Matt 4:23, "among the people", Matt. 11:11, 16:7,8; 20:26,27; 21:38; 26:5; Romans 1:5,6,13 and numerous other places throughout the New Testament.

11 The "he" is not in the Greek but is taken from a verb in the second person, and could be "he" or "she".

12 The King James incorrectly translates "to every man" but "man" is not in the Greek.

13 Quoted from *Paul, Women and Wives*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.1992, page 120.