

# Learning How to Minister From I Corinthians 14:26-40

## Part Two

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*Part One of David Hamilton's analysis was printed under the title "Should Women Keep Silent?" in the Summer 2003 issue of PRISCILLA PAPERS.*

**P**AUL'S FIRST WORD TO WOMEN IN THIS PASSAGE WAS corrective. He wrote, "Women should be silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home."<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, Paul's command to the women to be silent has been the focal point of much discussion. However, many overlook the important fact that this command does not stand alone. Paul had already given the exact same command to be silent twice in this very passage. He had told various individuals and groups who were disrupting the service to be silent. Each of these three commands was given so that the Corinthian worship would reflect the character of a "God of peace" and result in the edification of all present.

Paul hammered home again and again the message to remain silent. However, we have lost the impact of his deliberate repetition of this one command by the way it has been translated in the NIV:

- Those who speak in tongues "should keep quiet" (verse 28)
- The prophets "should stop" (verse 30)
- The women "should remain silent" (verse 34)

These appear to be three different commands, but they are not. Paul repeated the exact same word in Greek to each group. He intended for us to see a deliberate continuity of thought among verses 28, 30, and 34. To see the symmetry of Paul's repetition restored, we should translate the text as follows:

- To those who speak in tongues "be silent" (verse 28)
- To the prophets "be silent" (verse 30)
- To the women "be silent" (verse 34)

It is dishonest to single out the command directed to the women and make it more of an absolute than the command given to those who speak in tongues or to the prophets. Why have we been obsessed with the third example of orderly conduct and ignored the first two?

Look at the first two examples. It is obvious Paul's "be silent" wasn't an "absolutely-forever-under-every-circumstance-and-at-all-times" injunction against those who spoke in tongues or those who prophesied. No, in the same passage he wrote, "Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues."<sup>2</sup> The ministry gifts were not to be

permanently silenced but were to be exercised "in a fitting and orderly way."<sup>3</sup> The same is true regarding the women. Paul was not telling women to refrain from all public ministry. To force such an interpretation does violence to the integrity of the text.

### Paul Linked Being Silent to Taking Turns

In these three verses, "be silent" had to do with taking turns,<sup>4</sup> listening to one another, and being self-controlled<sup>5</sup> "so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged."<sup>6</sup> Those who spoke in tongues and the prophets were to participate at times and be silent at times so that all might "be done for the strengthening of the church."<sup>7</sup> The same would be true for the women in the church.

If we consider this passage carefully, we see that prior to the injunction of verse 34, women had already been told to be silent. Women were most probably among those who spoke in tongues,<sup>8</sup> and they were most definitely among those who prophesied.<sup>9</sup> So when Paul earlier instructed the first two groups to be silent, he was not speaking to a group comprising only male ministers. In fact, the gender-inclusive nature of the church's ministry is clear throughout this passage.

Paul began this portion by stressing, "What then shall we say, brothers [and sisters]? When you come together, *everyone* has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation."<sup>10</sup> "Everyone" knew no gender limitations. Paul anticipated that men and women would participate fully in ministry, including the bringing of "a revelation" and "a tongue"<sup>11</sup>—the two main issues at play here.

When you think about it, the fact that Paul was having to correct women in the *way* they were ministering confirms the fact that they *were* ministering. If Paul had not given them freedom to minister in the first place, they couldn't have ministered wrongly. It was because they did not know how to exercise this freedom correctly that they now stood in need of his correction.

### Why Was Paul Correcting the Women?

It's difficult to re-create the setting of the Corinthian church when we do not have all of the pieces to the puzzle. Several possible reasons exist for Paul's words "Let the women keep silent." Any of the following could have been disrupting the Corinthians' orderly worship:

- Women, like the men, may have been ministering without consideration of others, lacking in self-control.

- Because women were uneducated, they may have been interrupting the service by asking questions inappropriately.
- Some of the women may have been reverting to the model of their pagan worship, disrupting the service with their loud noises.

In pagan religions, the only way women were allowed to participate was by wailing and making high-pitched cries called “ululations.” If you have ever traveled in the Middle East, or if you have seen the movie *Not Without My Daughter* or *Lawrence of Arabia*, you have heard ululations of women. It is like no other sound you’ve ever heard. Women have been making these outcries—both for joy and for grief—for thousands of years. From Homer onward, writers described ululation. Among pagans, the men ministered and offered sacrifices while the women provided the sound effects. Paul now expected all to minister, but in an orderly way, without the chaos of their pagan past.

### Paul Told Women to Speak, Too

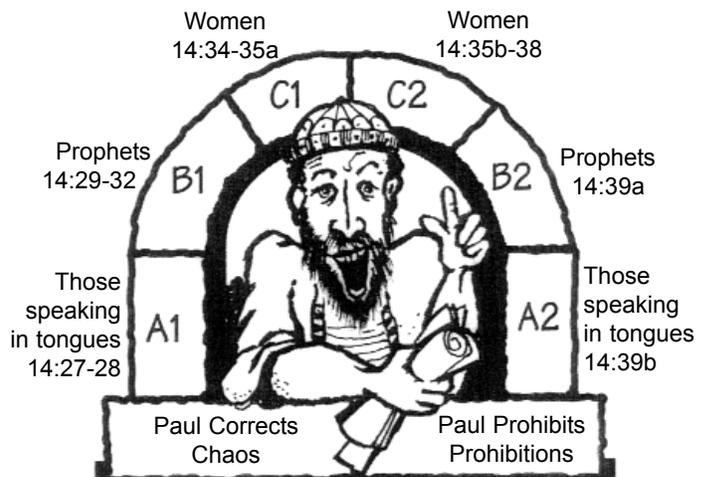
The purpose of this passage was not to limit ministry but to encourage it. Paul wanted to teach new believers how to minister in this young church. He had already said he wanted all—men *and* women—to be ready to contribute with “a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.”<sup>12</sup> To promote true ministry, Paul found it necessary to correct wrong forms of ministry with his three “be silents.”<sup>13</sup> His primary objective was to get the people to minister.

This objective is why Paul also commanded the people twice in this passage to “speak.”<sup>14</sup> There is no indication in the text that these commands to speak were limited to men. Paul was addressing anyone who spoke to God on behalf of the people by means of tongues or who spoke to the people on behalf of God by means of prophecy. And as we know, both men and women participated in these two strategic ministries of the church.<sup>15</sup>

### Submit to Whom?

Next, Paul commanded the women to “be in submission,”<sup>16</sup> but he did not specify to whom or to what. This omission is quite surprising when we see that out of the thirty-eight places in the New Testament where this verb appears, this is the only time the object to whom one is to submit is not clearly stated.<sup>17</sup> The only instance!

Of course, some will want to rush ahead to the next verse, where husbands are mentioned, and assume that Paul meant that the women were to submit to their husbands. But hold on a minute! Husband-and-wife relationships have not been mentioned at all in this passage up to this point. Keep in mind that this is the conclusion of a seven-part series on public worship in the church. Yes, husbands will be talked about in the next verse, but up to now, marriage has not been the subject of the discussion. Ministry has.



I Corinthians 14: 27-39

Perhaps Paul had something else in mind. Let’s look in the previous verses for the antecedent (the preceding noun that Paul was linking to the new verb *submit*). In other words, to whom or what were these women to submit? Three good possibilities stand out: (1) the churches, (2) God, and (3) themselves. Let’s consider each of them.

#### Possibility 1: The Churches

The last noun mentioned was “the churches,” or its parallel, “the congregation of the saints.”<sup>18</sup> If this was the antecedent Paul meant, he was telling the women to be submissive to the order of the church or to the leaders of the church as they exercised their ministry gifts. This would be the same as what he told those speaking in tongues and prophesying to do. Both men and women were supposed to submit their participation in ministry to church leadership so that worship could be done in an orderly, edifying way.

#### Possibility 2: God

If we look farther back in the text for the antecedent, the next noun we find is “God,” when Paul said that “God is not a God of disorder but of peace.”<sup>19</sup> We are all supposed to give him unqualified submission, whatever our gender. The implication would be that submitting to God would result in imitating him, bringing order and peace to correct whatever was going on in the Corinthian church during worship.

It’s interesting to see that the phrase “orderly way” in verse 40 and “submit” come from the same root word in Greek. Submission and order are intimately related. Paul was saying that order cannot reign in the church unless everyone has a submissive attitude.

#### Possibility 3: Themselves

There’s still one other possibility for the antecedent of the verb *submit*. If we look even farther back into the text, we find another phrase in which the very same verb for *submit* is used. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:32, “The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.”<sup>20</sup> Self-con-

trol was supposed to characterize the exercise of spiritual gifts. Paul showed that the prophetic utterances of the Spirit of God were completely different from the uncontrollable outbursts of pagan worship. The prophet was to keep his or her own spirit in submission. Again, women were not the first group Paul required to be submitted in this way. Paul expected to find such submission in the life of anyone who ministered in the church.

All the previous alternatives seem reasonable. Each fits the context of the passage. And each would be consistent with what we know about Paul's spirit of mutuality and reciprocity between men and women in public ministry. So how do we know which one of the three Paul had in mind? Paul didn't leave us guessing. He defined the expected submission by the phrase "as the Law says."<sup>21</sup> This clearly rules out the possibility that Paul was talking about marriage here because nowhere in the Old Testament do we find any instruction for wives to submit to their husbands. This might surprise you, but a thorough search of the Hebrew Scriptures yields no command for wives to submit to their husbands.

Some might point to Genesis 3:16, where God said to Eve, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." However, in this passage God wasn't *prescribing* how men and women should relate to each other. This was no command. God was simply *describing* the consequences of sin. God never intended Genesis 3:16 to become our guide for life and relationships. There was no command in this passage for Eve to submit to Adam—Eve was merely told the great impact sin would have on her world.

### What Law Was Paul Referring To?

So, we are back to considering the three possibilities—women were being told to submit either to the church, to God, or to themselves. Only one of these emerges with a clear Old Testament foundation. Psalm 37:7 commands, "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him." It is interesting to note how this verse was translated in the Septuagint.<sup>22</sup>

The Greek-speaking Jews who prepared a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) saw a remarkable correlation between "silence" and "submission." There are three places in Psalms where the Hebrew text speaks of being silent unto God. In each case...translators rendered this by the Greek verb meaning "to submit oneself." The original implication is one of attentiveness and receptivity to God.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps when he spoke of submission, Paul simply had in mind the Old Testament idea of "waiting on God, or the thought of humility towards God."<sup>24</sup> If so, Paul was asking of women the same thing he required of the men. He was telling the women, "You've been accepted as full partners

in the Gospel. You've been given the privilege to minister through prayer and prophecy. In the past you were excluded from participation in the synagogues and in the Greek and Roman temples. But now the double standard is over. You have new freedom in Christ. However, we expect the same thing from you that we expect from the men. You are free to minister, but you must do so responsibly. Stop ministering in a disorderly, disruptive, discourteous, insubordinate way. Your participation in the church must be done in an orderly way, submitting to God so that your ministry edifies the whole Body of Christ."

### Paul Does a Really Cool Thing

What Paul said next was extraordinary. "If [women] want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home." This is often seen as a prohibition on participation, but it is just the opposite! Paul was encouraging the women in their desire to learn. He was urging them not to stay on the sidelines but to equip themselves for full participation in the Body of Christ! These words were a radical break with all of the surrounding cultures. Women had little or no educational opportunities among the Greeks or Romans. The Jews also excluded women from study, including formal religious training.

Paul would have no part of that. He wanted women to have the opportunity to learn. So he commanded them to ask their husbands for teaching. He affirmed a woman's right to learn. He opened doors for women that they had only dreamed of for centuries. However, women were supposed to ask these questions in an appropriate setting, not during the worship service while someone else was praying, prophesying, or otherwise publicly ministering.

Paul's words also had a seismic impact on the men. Implicit in his instructions to the women was his expectation that the husbands would provide their wives with an opportunity for education. Men had never been given that obligation before—not since the beginning of time! There were no institutions where women could go to learn—no women's training schools, no women's colleges. It was up to the husbands of the church in Corinth to reorient their values and spend the time necessary to bring their wives up to speed. Paul made it clear: The men should take personal responsibility for this. If their wives wanted to learn, the husbands should do everything they could to help them.

This was a natural outcome of Paul's teaching in these sections on church life. Time and again Paul addressed the need for new believers to be edified, to learn, and to grow. He didn't want them to be ignorant.<sup>25</sup> He wanted them to use the spiritual gifts to build one another up, strengthening the church,<sup>26</sup> which of course included women. He said he preferred to use those gifts in public that allowed him "to instruct others."<sup>27</sup> He urged them all—men *and* women—to grow toward spiritual maturity, to think as adults,<sup>28</sup> not

childishly.<sup>29</sup> His stated goal was that “everyone [regardless of gender] be instructed and encouraged.”<sup>30</sup>

Paul was making sure that women were not left out of the process. He knew they were at a disadvantage. Because of their cultures, women were entering the kingdom of God with an educational handicap. Paul’s instruction sought to eradicate that. With their husbands’ help, women could begin to function as peers.

This might seem a small thing to us today, but it was huge in Paul’s day. When Paul made provision for women to be taught, he leavened the dough of culture with a yeast that would grow through coming centuries. He gave women the tools to enter into their God-ordained destinies. Even while he was correcting women who were disrupting public worship, he gave them a way to better their lives. His words weren’t harsh authoritarianism, relegating women to some narrow role. On the contrary, they showed Paul’s compassionate leadership, opening new doors of opportunity for those whom society had excluded and ignored.

### Paul Defended Women in Ministry

Next, Paul shifted his emphasis from correcting those who were creating chaos (which characterized the first half of his chiasm) to protecting everyone’s liberty to minister (in the second half). He corrected those who sought to deny people’s right to participate.

If you’ll recall from part one,<sup>31</sup> there were two schools of thought in the Corinthian church. After dealing with the “anything goes” school, Paul next addressed the “nothing is allowed” school. The former had placed no restraint on individual freedom of participation whatsoever. Paul took up the challenge of the statement “It is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

The Greek word translated “disgraceful” occurs only three times in the New Testament.<sup>32</sup> The fact that Paul used it both here and in other places in the New Testaments helps us interpret it. In 1 Cor. 11:7b, Paul—in the context of women praying and prophesying—went to great lengths to affirm that women were the glory of men, a source of joy, not of embarrassment; of pride, not of dishonor.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, this statement—that women speaking in the church was disgraceful—was not something that Paul endorsed.

A moment earlier, Paul had told women to be silent, but not because the fact that they were speaking was disgraceful. Their speaking was contributing to disorder in the church and standing in the way of people being edified. Paul did not make *women* taboo. He made *chaos* taboo.

The critics of women participating in the Corinthian church had totally missed Paul’s point. They were holding to old concepts from Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture, not to things thought by Christ. Listen to how closely this statement quoted by Paul mirrored the pervasive thoughts of the ancients:

- The Greeks said, “The women in silence obey.”<sup>34</sup>
- Aristotle repeated Sophocles’ famous refrain, “Silence gives grace to woman.”<sup>35</sup>

This attitude toward women was carried over into the Roman era:

- Plutarch said, “Keeping at home and keeping silence”<sup>36</sup> was the appropriate role for women.
- A Roman playwright said, “Married women are to watch silently and laugh silently, check the tinkle of their voices and keep their chatter for their home.”<sup>37</sup> And, “A woman is always worth more seen than heard.”<sup>38</sup>

This sentiment was echoed by the Jewish rabbis, who said of women:

- “Thy silence is fairer than thy speech.”<sup>39</sup>
- “A silent wife is a gift of the Lord.”<sup>40</sup>
- “A woman’s voice is a sexual incitement,”<sup>41</sup> therefore “[to listen to] a woman’s voice is indecent.”<sup>42</sup>

### Paul Says, “No Way!”

What, then, was Paul’s response to this dredging up of the old idea that it was disgraceful for women to speak? Paul countered, “ἄ [Nonsense!] Did the word of God originate with you? ἄ [What!] Are you the only people it has reached?”<sup>43</sup>

In other words, Paul refuted the claim of some men to hold exclusive rights to minister. God’s Word was not going to be limited by narrow, gender-exclusive schemes. Paul had already clearly established the validity of women in public ministry and was not going to allow anyone to contradict him on this point: “If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.”<sup>44</sup>

Paul then returned to the other two groups—those who spoke in tongues and the prophets—defending their rights to minister as well.<sup>45</sup> With this he completed his chiasm. He then finished by returning to his central theme in verse 40: “But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”

So, should women “be silent”? Yes, just like the men. Should women be prepared to minister with “a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation”? Yes, just like the men. Should women exercise self-control as they minister? Yes, just like the men. Should women seek to educate themselves so that they can better edify others when they minister? Yes, just like the men. “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.” 

*This article is chapter 15 from the book Why Not Women: A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership by Loren Cunningham and David Joel*

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David J. Hamilton is a veteran missionary and scholar who wrote his master's thesis on the difficult Bible passages related to the ministry of women, an extensive work in which he cites some four hundred books and articles. David recently coauthored *Courageous Leaders Transforming Their World* and served as one of the senior content editors for the Christian Growth Study Bible.

He has served with Youth With A Mission (YWAM) for more than twenty years, currently as an international associate provost for the University of the Nations, and also as assistant to the president. He and his wife, Christine, have four children.

1. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35a. NIV text modified by the authors.
2. 1 Corinthians 14:39.
3. 1 Corinthians 14:40.
4. 1 Corinthians 14:31.
5. 1 Corinthians 14:32.
6. 1 Corinthians 14:31.
7. 1 Corinthians 14:26.
8. 1 Corinthians 14:2 states that "anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God." This can be one form in which the women are said to have prayed in public (1 Corinthians 11:5, 13). Indeed, we see that speaking in tongues is clearly associated with prayer in 1 Corinthians 14:14-15: "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind."
9. 1 Corinthians 11:5.
10. 1 Corinthians 14:26, NIV text modified by authors and emphasis added. The word *adelphos*, in the plural masculine form as we have it here, may be used to address either a group of just brothers or a mixed group of brothers and sisters. The latter would be the most normal understanding of this word, as Paul had previously addressed women along with the men in these sections regarding public ministry within the church. For that reason, NRSV translates it with nongender terminology "friends."
11. These two are among various possible forms of ministry expressed in 1 Corinthians 14:26. This list is not intended to be exhaustive but rather is exemplary of the possible diversity of ministry during a Christian worship service. Note that to bring a revelation could have involved either preaching, teaching, or prophesying. It is the public ministry of the Word of God.
12. 1 Corinthians 14:26.
13. 1 Corinthians 14:28, 30, 34.
14. 1 Corinthians 14:28, 29.
15. 1 Corinthians 11:4-5.
16. 1 Corinthians 14:34. The Greek verb is *upotasso*.
17. See Hamilton, *I Commend to You Our Sister*, Appendix R.
18. 1 Corinthians 14:33, 34. Although the NIV translates one as "congregations" and the other as "churches," in both instances the Greek noun *ekklesia* is employed.
19. 1 Corinthians 14:33.
20. Both the phrase "must be in submission" in 14:34 and "are subject" in 14:32 are translations of the Greek verb *upotasso*. Again we see that Paul is requiring of women only that which he required of all.
21. Though Paul's appeal to the Law for authority may at first strike us as unusual, we must realize that he does so on two other occasions in this letter: 1 Corinthians 9:8-9 and 14:21.
22. The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use during Paul's time.

23. Kroeger and Kroeger, *I Suffer Not*, 75-76. The three Old Testament references are Psalm 37:7, 62:1, and 62:5.
24. Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, 299.
25. 1 Corinthians 12:1. The word translated in the NIV as "brothers" is *adelphos*. This Greek word in the plural can refer either to a group of males or to a group of males and females. See the NRSV, which says, "Brothers and sisters...."
26. 1 Corinthians 14:5, 12.
27. 1 Corinthians 14:19.
28. 1 Corinthians 14:20.
29. What a sharp contrast with pagan practice, which always considered women to be intellectual minors, never able to grow beyond mental childhood. See Hamilton, *I Commend to You Our Sister*, 68.
30. 1 Corinthians 14:31.
31. Part one was printed in *Priscilla Papers*, Summer 2003.
32. 1 Corinthians 11:6, 14:35; Ephesians 5:12.
33. See Chapters 12 and 13 in David Hamilton and Loren Cunningham's book *Why Not Women* for a thorough discussion of 1 Cor. 11:2-13 (Seattle: YWAM, 2000), 159-84.
34. Aristophanes, *The Lysistrata*, 524-532.
35. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.5.4-8 (1259b-1260a). Also, Sophocles, "Ajax" in *Sophocles, Volume II: Ajax, Electra, Trachiniae, Philoctetes*, trans. F. Storr (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1929), 293.
36. Plutarch, *Bride and Groom*, 142D.
37. Titus Maccius Plautus, *Little Carthaginian*. Quoted in F. H. Sandbach, *The Comic Theatre of Greece and Rome* (New York: Norton, 1977), 109.
38. Titus Maccius Plautus, "The Rope (Rudens)" in *Plautus, Volume IV: The Little Carthaginian, Pseudolus, and The Rope*, trans. Paul Nixon (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1951), 1114.
39. M. Gittin 4.8.
40. Sirach 26:14 RSV.
41. B. Berakhot 24a.
42. B. Kiddushin 70a.
43. 1 Corinthians 14:36.
44. 1 Corinthians 14:37-38.
45. 1 Corinthians 14:39.

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