



# DIGGING DEEPER

## WEEK 5

### The Sound of Silence

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 we find these words: “Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says. If they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings.”

These statements, sandwiched in the middle of a chapter about speaking in tongues and order in the church, can be confusing to us as modern women. In other writings Paul clearly has said that men and women are equal in Christ. To the church at Galatia he writes, “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). So why this instruction to be silent when the church gathers?

There are three main views among Christians regarding the interpretation and application of these verses.

1. **The instruction for women to be silent in the church was related to the cultural conditions of the original audience.** This view tends to be the most commonly held view in church practice today. Similar to Paul’s instruction for women to cover their heads, this instruction for women to be silent had some cultural “wrapping” attached to a specific issue related to the overarching principle of order in the church. The focus was on maintaining clarity and order rather than keeping women from participating in worship.
2. **Women can speak but should not teach in the church.** Proponents of this view believe Paul was referring to teaching when he spoke of the silence of women. They cite 1 Timothy 2:12 for scriptural support: “I do not let women teach men or have authority over them. Let them listen quietly.”



Some who take this stance do not allow women to teach at all while others permit women to teach children or other women but not audiences of mixed genders.

3. **Women should be completely silent in the church.** Those who hold this stance do not see any culture wrapped in this verse but consider it a binding instruction. Though few traditions hold strictly to this view today, I know a family who left a church because women were allowed to pray and make announcements.

To understand the first view, we must explore the cultural context. It is significant that Paul raises this issue in the midst of reprimanding the church at Corinth for their lack of order. What was going on here?

Christianity brought liberation and hope to women of that time who were considered second-class citizens and did not have access to education. Jesus talked to women freely, which was unheard of in Jewish culture, and encouraged them to learn and grow in knowledge. He told Martha that Mary had chosen the better part in sitting at his feet and listening (Luke 10:42).

Throughout the New Testament we see women in the early church leading and exercising their spiritual gifts:

- Phoebe was a deacon in the church who was called worthy of honor and helpful to many. (Romans 16:1-2)
- Priscilla was a co-worker in Paul's ministry who once risked her life on his behalf. (Romans 16:3-4)
- Junia was a fellow Jew who suffered in prison with Paul and was highly respected among the apostles (though there is some debate about whether or not Junia was female or male). (Romans 16:7)
- Euodia and Syntyche were women who worked hard in telling others the good news. (Philippians 4:2-3)

We also read in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 that women could pray and prophesy with their heads covered. Knowing the freedom that Christianity brought to women makes this passage about women being silent in church puzzling.

Our responsibility in studying the Bible is to recognize tensions and make theologically informed decisions. When we look at the whole of Scripture, we see that gifts are given to all—women and men alike. In reality, few churches today could say that they follow a literal interpretation of Paul's mandate. In many churches women are doing much in the areas of leading, teaching, and missions. And in most churches women welcome guests, make announcements, pray, or share testimonies of what God has done.

Although Paul instructed women to be silent and ask their questions at home, we must be careful to unwrap the cultural implications of the original audience so that we do not get caught up in the letter rather than the spirit of the law. The question we should ask is "What is God's heart in this?"

- One plausible explanation some scholars have suggested is that women in the early church were liberated to learn but still had a long way to go in their knowledge and understanding. In their immaturity, they may have been interrupting the order of church meetings with questions that were valid yet so elementary that they were disruptive. We might liken it to individuals asking rudimentary questions in a budget meeting; they need time to learn and grow—to grasp more difficult concepts—so that their basic but legitimate questions do not slow the progress of the meeting. One commentator said it this way: “Perhaps the largely uneducated women of that day were interrupting proceedings with irrelevant questions that would be better dealt with in their homes.”<sup>1</sup>

While Christians may disagree about the interpretation and application of these verses about women being silent in the church, we can live love even in the midst of opposing views. Each of us must make our own decisions about how to understand the biblical text and find a local body of believers where we can serve in the way we feel called and equipped.

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1. Craig L. Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 292.

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