

ARE WOMEN TO REMAIN SILENT IN THE GATHERINGS?

(Paul's so-called 'command of silence', 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12)

Gerrie Malan

1 Co 14: 34 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also saith the law.

1 Co 14: 35 And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.



1 Ti 2: 11 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.

1 Ti 2: 12 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

INTRODUCTION

The church world has been focusing intensively on specific questions in the past few decades. This did not really flow forth from primary Bible study and resultant reconsideration of understanding the original meaning of portions of the Scriptures. No, the problems were mostly the result of neo-liberal demands coming from small minority groups in society who were previously considered to be unacceptable, and their case has been driven by a small group of so-called post modern thinkers within the church.

One of these problems has been the position of women in ministry.

The Afrikaans Reformed church environment did not escape this, and synod after synod wrestled with the matter. It is still continuing. Whereas one or two of these denominations moved on, first accepting women as elders and later admitting women as ministers, another one has continued to resist on the basis of Paul's so-called command of silence, as quoted above from 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 as important motivation.

The post modern thinkers do not regard the authority of Scripture as fixed and binding. Because the Dutch Reformed Church of SA, for example, has moved on and admitted women ministers, the post modern group now declare that the denomination has in fact recalled the New Testament command of silence. They then use this event, for example, as a principle to insist that anti-gay texts in the Bible should equally be declared null and void in the light of societal realities of today. – in the process they also make much of so-called scientific explanations (2016; Janse van Rensburgⁱ).

In their report to the Dutch Reformed Church's General Synod of 2015, the General Task Team Doctrine and Current Matters (Algemene Taakspan Leer en Aktuele Sake) insisted that room should be made for a variety of perspectives within the Dutch Reformed Church.ⁱⁱ While the Task Team states that the Scriptures are evidence of God under the guidance of the Spirit of God, they dilute it in the very next sentence describing the Bible as a **derived and secondary authority** compared to the only true and final authority, that of the Living Triune God.himself.ⁱⁱⁱ Seen in isolation such reasoning sounds good, of course, but it unfortunately lacks any credible evidence on how such a final authority is received from God (more so in view of their insistence on 'scientific evidences').

Discussions and reasoning on the command of silence often takes place on the basis that men and women sat in separate areas in the Jewish synagogues, with women often even seated on a gallery. This command would then supposedly prevent shouting to and fro. Paul's directly preceding sentence (1 Co 14:33) does declare that that God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints, does it not? Others again argue on the basis of cultural circumstances of the time and place, and the position of women compared to that of men. In the process both approaches read into the Scripture that which supports the specific view or expectation. There are even those who argue that Paul did not write these two verses to the Corinthians.

For me there is only one approach that can lift out the truth in this case and that is to make an accurate determination of what Paul penned in this portion of Scripture. In the process a few simple and basic principles are important, viz. the full context of the content of Paul's letter, as well as the meaning of words within that specific time context. The reader might already feel at this point that a variety of Bible versions all confirm Paul declared that women should remain silent in the gatherings and are not allowed to teach men. My question to that is: Is it really so? Let us see.

THE LARGER FULL CONTEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 14:34-35

As point of departure one needs to realise that this portion of Scripture forms part of a larger portion of Paul's letter and deals specifically with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The letter was written from Ephesus in reply to a letter compiled by a group in Corinth and which was seemingly delivered to him by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (16:17).

- The first six chapters contains Paul's reaction to information members of the house of Chloe are said to have given him, and which deals with some misunderstandings arising from a previous letter from Paul (5:9).
- Then follows the part we know as chapters 7-16 in reply to questions posed by the congregation (16:17).^{iv} Of these the focus in chapters 12-14 is specifically on the question of spiritual gifts.

The original scriptures of the Bible were not written in chapters and with verse

One always needs to bear in mind that the biblical writings were not written in the form of chapters and verses. This was only added in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Do not allow these artificial additions to mislead you. Paul's letters, as is the case with all the books in the Bible, should be studied as a whole.

In our compact book, *Rightly Divide The Word*, my wife, Martie, and I have explained that Bible translations may sometimes be confusing and misleading, and the topic I am addressing in this article is a good example in this regard, as you will soon see. (You can download our book free from our website: www.hoseaconnection.org).

SEPARATE AREAS FOR MEN AND WOMEN?

In this regard one only needs to consider the general circumstances of gatherings at the time. We read in various places in the New Testament writings that the believers met primarily in the homes. According to church history the use of specific buildings for this purpose only became practice some two or three centuries later.^v The houses obviously did not incorporate separate areas for men and women as one would have found in synagogues.

Nowhere in the New Testament does one find any indication that Jesus or His disciples separated the men and women in gatherings. In fact, Acts 1:14, for example, declares that “*These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.*” This took place in the upper room where the remaining eleven disciples gathered after He was taken up in heaven in their presence (Acts 1:6-11).

Clearly, separate areas for men and women does not make a credible argument.

DID PAUL REQUIRE WOMEN TO REMAIN QUIET?

1 Corinthians as one example shows that the gatherings were personal and informal. It also shows clearly that the gatherings were based on general participation:

1Co 14:26 How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.

But does the word ‘brethren’ used here and elsewhere in the letter not indicate only men? My first reaction was that the whole compilation implied that this word was used to indicate the compilers and signatories of the letter to Paul. However, the letter is addressed to “(...) *the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord (...)*” (1 Co 1:2). More focused word study revealed that the specific word, *adelphós*, was also used in various forms of meaning, including that of a fellowship of love. Thus, the members of the same Christian community were called ‘brothers.’^{vi} Here we see again just how deficient our modern translations often are to present the true meaning of words, statements and viewpoints in the Bible to us. By using the word *adelphós*, which was translated as ‘brethren,’ Paul was actually addressing the whole community of believers in Corinth.

The word *adelphós*, translated as ‘brethren’ referred to the whole Christian community (or congregation) in Corinth.

In chapter 11:5 Paul specifically refers to women who pray or prophesy – who therefore are actively involved in the gatherings. His reasoning throughout chapters 11-14 at all times reflect a spirit of inclusivity in the spiritual gifts and unity among all. Please read it carefully and note especially his repetitive application of the idea of ‘all’ in 12:29-30. After making the plea then that they should covet the best gifts, he continues with describing to them an even more excellent way (or gift), the way of love. We know this description as chapter 13.

Chapter 14 shows us Paul exclaiming the excellence of the gift of prophecy above that of tongues, but all the time exhorting them to let all things be done unto edifying the congregation. In:26 he indicates that **every one** of them had a contribution when they gathered together. In this regard too, he asks that everything be done unto edifying. There is no indication of a principle that women should be silent.

DOES 14:34-35 THEN NOT CONTRADICT THE REST?

Bear in mind once again that Paul is busy reacting to the content of the congregation’s letter to him. The moment one ignores this, you open yourself up to misrepresentations. The key to understanding this portion requires one to bring verse 36 into the picture. For the sake of understanding the complete picture I provide all three verses:

1 Co 14:34 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under

obedience, as also saith the law.

1 Co 14:35 And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

1 Co 14:36 What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?

Looking at this (and one can adding reading of more verses) I believe everyone would have to acknowledge that something does not make sense.

- There is no connection or transition between verses 35 and 36.
- Look again, one could say the same of verses 36 and 37.
- It appears as if verses 34, 35 and even 36 are irrelevant in this matter and that verse 37 connects directly to verse 34.

Because of this seeming unclear situation, some theologians such as Gordon Fee have concluded that Paul did not write verses 34 and 35, but that it was added by a scribe who copied the letter.^{vii} This argument, however, also does not make sense as it does not contribute any clarification seeing that verse 36 will still seem to be an out of place patch. Most contemporary translations deepen this deficiency rather than present the correct meaning through very accurate translation (not philosophising). Let me share more in this regard.

The small first word of verse 36 is an important key– it is simply omitted in many versions.

Pauls begins his sentence (verse 36) with the little word ἦ. Like so many other Greek words, this little word also has multiple meanings that require very careful consideration of the specific context in which it appears. In addition, the markings seen above Greek letters (polytonic Greek

diacritics), provide variations of pronunciation and meaning. One of the meanings for ἦ found in the extensive Greek-English Lexicon of Liddell-Scott-Jones, published in 1843, is that of an **exclamation expressing disapproval**.^{viii} Nordgren also refers to this source, but adds meanings of **a cry of surprise** as well as **a repressive exclamation** in view of these usages in the works of Euripides and Aristophanes.^{ix} They were both Greek playwrights from the fifth century of whom considerable works have survived, and which provide clarity for the meanings of various words.

With these explanations in hand I was able to read the 26 versions of The New Testament on my e-Sword program, complemented with the New Jerusalem Bible and a Dutch version from 1899 in my bookshelf. It was interesting to realise the old King James Version of 1611 presented 1 Corinthians 14:36 as follows, which agreed with the above descriptions of meaning:

1 Co 14:36 What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?

Please note the introductory exclamation, ‘What?’ The earlier Geneva Bible (1560) did not use the expression “What?” in the text itself, but did include it in the extensive marginal notes completed by 1599. It is described in the notes as a sharp reprehension regarding the right to use the spiritual gifts in the assemblies, lest the Corinthians might deem themselves to be the only wise ones.

Several other versions also have the verse start with the word “What?” Among them is the

translation of Murdock (1851), the *Revised Version* (late nineteenth century official revision of the KJV), and George Lamsa's 1933 translation which is based on the Syriac Peshitta manuscripts (and therefore from an Aramaic dialect).

- **These versions (translations) confirm the King James Version's rebuking exclamation. It supports the understanding that verses 34-35 really are statements taken by Paul from the Corinthians' letter which he then rebukes it strongly.**

In summary: Paul's first letter to the congregation in Corinth found in the Bible, was clearly not the first letter he wrote them. This letter was written approximately in the year 55 AD while Paul was staying in Ephesus. Some information was conveyed to him from the house of Chloe about misunderstandings emanating from an earlier letter to them. In addition, a group had written a letter to him on specific matters such as the flow in the spiritual gifts.

In his present letter Paul addresses all these matters and this provides the true context. Thorough study shows that he quoted their view on the submissiveness of women in the gatherings, followed by a sharp rebuke that by it they wanted to give new meaning to God's word. Unfortunately this context has been lost in many modern translations because the translators ignored and omitted a single small word found in the manuscripts. Once one rectifies this, it removes the existing and continuing confusion.

Paul rebukes the Corinthians sharply for their insistence that women should be silent in the gatherings.

- **In other words, the Corinthians made the statement in their letter (or they reported the insistence of some in the congregation) that women should remain silent in the gatherings, for which Paul strongly rebuked them.**

THE CONTEXT OF 1 TIMOTHY 2:11-12

In my study of this topic, I realised once again how important the correct and full context of Scripture portions is for correct understanding. With correct understanding I wish to emphasise that it inherently comes down to how the original recipients or audience would have understood the written document or oral teaching. It also means that as far as contemporary context goes, one should guard against the temptation to read into the text what does not exist in order to obtain or prove a predetermined result.

- In this case Paul's letter was addressed to an established co-worker, Timothy, who he left in Ephesus in the course of their travel after his release from the first imprisonment in Rome. Timothy's instructions were to counter the influence of false teachers who have established themselves in this congregation (1:4).^x This already establishes a specific and direction giving context.

The three pastoral epistles of Paul to Timothy and Titus were his last ones. They were written approximately 63 and 64 AD (some 15 years after his first letter, which was the one to the Galatians), under specific circumstances and with specific objectives in mind. His approach and content differs to such extent from his other letters, that it appears as if he was addressing topics and circumstances of leadership to his two co-workers on matters concerning the congregations they were involved with, that he would normally deal with in a personal contact situation. Circumstances

The pastoral letters to Timothy (2) and Titus were his last three.

have forced him to do this by way of letters in these cases as he had left them in Ephesus and Crete. (His second letter to Timothy was written during his last imprisonment in Rome). **It is important to note that these letters were not addressed to congregations.**

Before I go into the context of this portion of Scripture any further, it is important to consider Paul's general approach as it pertained to the position of women in the spreading of the Gospel.

WOMEN AS PAUL'S CO-WORKERS

The history of Paul as proclaimer of the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire proves that shows various women in prominent leadership roles, rather than portraying Paul as one who proclaimed that women could not teach in the congregation.

- Priscilla (with her husband Aquila) is mentioned in various portions of Scripture. Acts 18:24-26 show us that they took the native Alexandrian Jew, Apollos, home in Ephesus and explained the way of God to him more accurately.
- In Acts 21:8-9 Luke writes that Paul's group, of which he was part, stayed with Philip the evangelist in Caesarea on their way to Jerusalem. Then he notes that Philip's four unmarried daughters prophesied.
- Phoebe is called a servant of the church in Cenchreae and word studies such as that of Vincent (e-Sword) indicate that it was generally explained as deaconess (Rom 16:1). Paul asks that they welcome her in a manner worthy of the saints and that they should assist her in whatever manner she might require their help.
- Mary, Tryphena and Tryphosa were also recognised as playing leadership roles in the church in Romans 16:6 & 12.
- Euodia and Syntyche intige were probably also deaconesses (Php 4:2).

To complete this part it is appropriate to consider the following from Paul's letter to the Galatians, which is seemingly his very first letter:

Gal 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

THE CONGREGATION IN EPHEBUS

Ephesus of biblical times was a major harbour city and one of the larger cities of the Roman Empire. It was a prosperous commercial and political centre. The city boasted numerous monuments, theaters and temples, including the temple of Diana (also called Artemis). It was renowned for religious pluralism, mystic cults and occult practices, Hellenised Judaism, as well as early Christianity.^{xi} In this Christian environment a false group developed that was apparently established by the deacon, Nicolas, and which became known as the Nicolaitans.^{xii} Their practices were referred to with disdain in the Book of Revelation (the letter to the church in Ephesus, Rev 2:6).

The congregation in Ephesus played a prominent role in Paul's travels and ministry. From the record in the Book of Acts and Paul's letters we learn that he visited them several times – once

remaining there for almost three years (Acts 19). This stay was ended after an uprising by members of the Diana cult.

PAUL'S DECLARATION IN 1 TIMOTHY 2:11-12

My considerable reading has shown that there are two popular explanations of Paul's statement to Timothy that a women should learn in silence in full submission, and that he did not allow a woman to teach ro have authority over a man. The first explanation accepts the cultural circumstances of the time as its basis and states that the woman was relegated to a lesser position, which Timothy was to teach the congregation to respect. Another explanation is based on doctrines of the Diana cult (or Artemis cult) that declared the woman to be the man's superior, that Eve was created first and that men were to be subjected to the woman. It is then postulated that there were women (or a woman) at the time who had been teaching such doctrine. Both these explanations are obviously based purely on assumptions.

Apart from these there is also an alleged translation error. The Australian Classical Greek scholar, Dr. Ann Nyland's translation reads that a woman was to learn without causing a fuss and to be supportive in everything. Paul did not grant her authority to teach that she was the originator of man. There is considerable criticism because of the Gnostic sources she used for support in determining the meaning of words, and that her translation of matters in the Bible pertaining to women are driven by a feministic agenda. I therefore mention this translation for completeness sake, but choose not to rely on it. As I will now show, it does not make any critical difference to my understanding of this portion of Scripture.

Superficially regarded it does seem that this section of Paul's letter to Timothy is problematic, especially in view of todays societal norms and customs. I therefore understand the various attempts to solve the situation. The fuss does seem totally unnecessary, however, and I agree with the question posed by Dr. David Thompson: **Do we read the entire Bible in light of these two problematic texts, or do we read these two texts in light of the rest of the Bible?**^{xiii} To follow the first alternative is to open one up to false teaching and this is exactly what has happened in the church practice.

The record of Paul's proclamation of the Gospel (his epistles and Luke's Acts of the Apostles) show in various places and ways that Paul appreciated as co-workers. But am I not now simply trying to hide a problem verse? The answer is an emphatic No!

In the introduction of his letter to Timothy, Paul unambiguously refered to his request that Timothy remain in Ephesus to command certain persons **to stop teaching false doctrine**. He called those people who wanted to be teachers of the law, although they did not understand what they were saying or insisting on. Timothy was fight the good fight for the faith and hold fast to good conscience. Paul noted that some ad rejected these and had suffered the shipwreck of their faith. Hymenaeus and Alexander are mentioned by name in this regard. The whole letter deals with the trustworthy word and good order in the community. Paul concluded his letter by once more noting that some people had deviated from the faith through false knowledge.

To summarise: We are dealing here with an instructional letter by Paul to an individual, his co-worker Timothy. It had been written in the context of the teaching of false doctrines

This letter to Timothy in Ephesus had instructions regarding false teaching and order that he had to rectify there

by some in the Christian community in Ephesus. It is interesting to note that Paul's letter to Titus, whom he left behind on the island of Crete during the same travel, also focused on combatting false teaching and the establishment of sound order in the congregation. However, one does not find a similar 'command of silence' for women and that reinforces my understanding that the relevant portion in Paul's letter to Timothy was due to specific problems involving a woman or women.

CONCUSION

In my study of this topic I shook my head in the realisation of how powerful the spirit of tradition had been and still is in the church environment. It is reality that my generation in South Africa grew up without the television and computer technology. If we had not been exposed to these during the latter part of our lives, something our parents and theirs did not have, we would probably still have been ignorant to the fact today of the many false teachings that emanated from all the traditions. I am grateful for the extensive library of works from many centuries that the information technology has opened up to me.

The Reformed ministers of our growing up years were all exposed to well equipped libraries at the seminaries of their universities and many years of fulltime study of the biblical languages and culture. This makes the struggles of so many synods over the last decade or two especially on matters such as the leadership role of the woman in the Christian environment even more difficult to understand.

There can probably be only one answer for this situation: by man's traditions and oral transmissions the word of God has been robbed of its power (Mat 15:1-14). In the process the community of believers has been robbed of the contributions of gifted and God blessed women. They were relegated to secondary roles for far too long. Some Reformed denominations have moved past this, but their explanations and continuing debates do not rest upon the Scriptural truth.^{xiv} There is a clear difference.

I also realised anew how important it is to study portions of Scripture in their full context – including the cultural, historical, geographical, literary and theological context. It also remains important to study Paul's epistles in the sequence they had been written in and not the sequence they hve been included in our Bibles. Considering the position of women in the gatherings against this reality, it becomes clear that there is no so-called command of silence in his most extensive work, the Epistle to the Romans. **In addition, we have noted the way in which Paul actively encouraged the prophetic gift to the Corinthians, among women as well. His recognition of Priscilla and other women in his letters also speak loudly.**

By stripping our reading of the relevant portions of Scripture in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy of all philosophising and assumptions of content above what has been written, we find that Paul's focus was misrepresentations, manmade traditions and therefore false teaching. This false teaching in the two congregations involved had nothing to do with a prohibition of full participation of women in principle in the gatherings. The exclusive requirement was that the activities were to be guided by the word of truth. Paul's eleven other letters do not support a doctrine that women are to be silent in the gatherings. The record of his history written in the Acts of the Apostles by Luke actually reflects the opposite.

Paul summarised it well in his second letter to Timothy (3:16-17):

All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

- Every person (not man) of God!
- Unto all good works!

Final thoughts

- In Luke 2:36-38 we find the prophetess Anna at the temple where she served God day and night. She was present when Joseph and Mary brought the child Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord according to the law. At that moment Anna “(...) *began to thank God and speak about Him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*”
- None of the other Apostles gave instruction in their letters that women are to be silent in the gatherings.
- Such an instruction is not found in the Epistle to the Hebrews or in the Book of Acts.

Dedicated to our granddaughter, Jo-Mari Malan. Our prayer is that your God given talents will bloom to inspire every person of God who passes your way, to allow their lives to be blessed by the word of truth, equipped unto all good works.

Amen!

ⁱ J. Janse van Rensburg. 2016. *Hermeneutiese Beginsels Vir Skrifverstaan*. Unpublished study document provided to a Cape Reformed study group.

ⁱⁱ ATLAS verslag. 2015. *Agenda*. Submitted to the General Synod 2015, p253. Quoted in *ibid*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*. p263.

^{iv} Wallace, D.B. 1998. *1 Corinthians: Introduction, Argument, and Outline*. Bible Studies Press. www.bible.org

^v Curtis, K. *A Look At The Early Church*. <http://www.christianity.com/print/11629559/>. Agelaai op 12 September 2016.

^{vi} Zodhiates, S. *The Complete WordStudy Dictionary*. Add-on to e-Sword. www.e-sword.net/support.html.

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