

CHAPTER XI

1 CORINTHIANS 14—SILENCE IN THE CHURCHES

1 Corinthians 7 and 11 are not the only passages in 1 Corinthians dealing with men and women—they are not even the most controversial.

1 Cor. 14:33b-36 As in all the congregations of the saints,⁹⁶ women should remain 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; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?

(⁹⁶ Osburn, in his *Women in the Church 1*, indicates that “As in all the congregations of the saints” is properly a part of the preceding sentence and that Paul’s discussion of women begins with “women should remain silent.” There was no punctuation in the original Greek, and First Century Greek was written entirely in capital letters. Scholars disagree on where this sentence begins)

Scriptural context. Like all scripture, we must first consider the context of this passage. The following synopsis of chapters 11 through 14 will serve to set the stage:

1 Cor. 11:2 *I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings*, just as I passed them on to you. 3 Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

4-16 [discussion of prayer, prophecy, and head coverings]

17 *In the following directives I have no praise for you*, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18-19 [condemnation of division]

20-34 [discussion of the Lord’s Supper]

12:1 *Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant*. 2-30 [discussion of spiritual gifts and the unity of believers] 31 But eagerly desire the greater gifts.

And now I will show you the most excellent way. 13:1-12 [discussion contrasting faith, hope, and love to other spiritual gifts] 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

14:1 *Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts*, especially the gift of prophecy. 2-25 [spiritual gifts are good, but must edify the church when used in the assembly].

26 What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. 27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. 28 If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. 29 Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. 30 And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. 31 For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. 32 The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. 33 For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

As in all the congregations of the saints, 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. 36 Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?

37 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. 38 If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. 39 Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40 But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

This long quote shows the structure of these four chapters of 1 Corinthians. You should first notice that chapter 11 contains two general discussions—head coverings and the Lord’s Supper. Paul ties them together. He introduces the first by saying, “I praise you.” In clear contrast, he introduces the next section of chapter 11 by saying, “In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.”⁹⁷ (97 KJV: “I praise you not ...”)

It is possible that the lack of praise relates not only to the Lord’s Supper, but also the abuses of the Spirit that are discussed in chapter 12-14. Paul says that he has no praise “in the following directives,” indicating that there would be a series of critical directives. And certainly the criticisms made in chapters 12-14 fit well within Paul’s pointed “your meetings do more harm than good.” Chapter 14 in particular describes meetings that do more harm than good and fits Paul’s words as well as Paul’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper in chapter 11. Also tying the chapters together is the theme of condemnation of division.

The point is simply this. All of chapters 11, 12, 13, and 14 are closely related discussions dealing with division and related problems in the Christian assemblies. Different particular problems are discussed, but the general theme is the same—stop sinning in your assemblies, especially the sin of division.

A. Exposition—Introduction.

With this in mind, let’s take a closer look at the passage.

“Women should remain silent.” What does this mean? As tempting as it is to say, “Means what it says; says what it means,” no thinking Christian can believe this passage really means that women must be silent during the assembly. Why not?

First, we conventionally allow women to break their silence in the assembly for any number of reasons, including:

1. Singing. We allow women to sing even when men do not accompany them. Many songs have not only female leads, but also female section solos.
2. Speaking in unison. There are many occasions where the congregation speaks in unison. Some churches say the Lord’s Prayer or some other prayer in unison. Others recite scripture in unison. Some do responsive readings. In each case, the women are not silent.
3. Praying. Many of our favorite hymns are prayers. For some reason, some have fallen into the habit of omitting the “amen” at the end of such songs, but the song is a prayer nonetheless. Women sing these prayers out loud, in the presence of men, and our only justification is that the women do so to a tune. I suppose we justify it due to the commands to sing, but these commands do not command women to sing apart from the men, nor do they even require singing in the assemblies. They just say sing with other Christians. They don’t say when or where.⁹⁸ (98 Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16. Of course, if the general commands to sing grant women license to sing in the assembly, one might argue that the general commands to teach, preach, spread the gospel, pray, etc. would also grant women the right to obey these commands in the assembly.)
4. Greeting. How many times have you attended a church where the service was interrupted while the members were asked to greet one another and the visitors? Were the women required to stay silent?
5. Confessing Jesus. When a woman comes to the front to be baptized, do we make her fill out a card to say that she believes in Jesus? Or does she say it out loud? I’ve never seen anyone make a candidate for baptism wait until after services or write down the answer to this question. And yet the passage says “silent.” It doesn’t say members only. It says “women.” And there is really no necessity

for a confession during services. After all, we could wait until after the closing prayer. But that's not our way.

So what's my point? Those who insist on a strictly literal interpretation of this passage must admit that their interpretation is neither strict nor literal. I have just offered a truly literal interpretation, and yet common sense tells us that this is not what Paul meant. So while we are searching for the truth of the matter, let's remember that no one at all occupies the "high ground" of literalness or even strictness. And while the interpretation that I will offer of this passage may not be very traditional, it is stricter and more literal than the traditionalists.

Second, the Bible's text itself, and not our culture or tradition, raises certain questions that must be taken into account in whatever conclusion we reach:

1. 1 Corinthians 11 is a discussion of appropriate headcoverings for women while they prophesy or pray in an assembly with men present. If it is a sin for a woman to pray or prophesy in the presence of men, why didn't Paul simply condemn the practice? If it is a sin for a woman to pray or prophesy in the presence of men, then Paul's instructions are on the order of instructing women on what to wear while committing adultery! If it's wrong, it's wrong, and Paul has no business discouraging on appropriate dress during sin.⁹⁹ (99 Ferguson criticizes Osburn for concluding that Paul approves of women prophesying in chapter 11. "The text does not say Paul 'approves' of the practice." True, but Paul would hardly spend so much effort addressing proper apparel for a practice that he disapproved. It is an absurd thought.)

2. There is nothing in the text that suggests that the assemblies under discussion in chapter 11 are different from those in chapter 14. As pointed out above, there is good reason to believe that the same assemblies are under consideration. After all, chapter 11 is part of the same discussion that concludes in chapter 14. But if we conclude that only one chapter is discussing the general assembly, comparable to our Sunday morning assembly, and the other is discussing some special assembly, it is much more logical to conclude that chapter 11 is discussing the general assembly since it is most closely tied to the discussion of the Lord's Supper. Moreover, the reference to angels being present in the assembly in chapter 11:10 indicates that much more than a casual gathering is at issue. To argue, as many do, that chapter 14 deals with the Lord's Supper assembly and chapter 11 is dealing with something more like our Sunday School classes is to ignore the textual evidence and impose our traditions on the scriptures. The argument simply has no support in the Bible.

3. That the assembly is in mind in chapter 11 is also plain from our own history. Until the last few decades, Church of Christ women felt compelled to wear hats (and even fashionable veils) to the assembly. If chapter 11 doesn't apply to the Sunday morning assembly, why did we require women to wear hats to such assemblies for nearly a century? I grant that the hat interpretation is false, but the assembly interpretation is actually quite sound.

And so we have what appears to be a perfect contradiction. Chapter 11 indicates that women may pray and prophesy in the presence of men in the assembly, but chapter 14 compels them to be silent in the assembly. How can both be true? How are we going to get out of this fix? And I must hasten to point out that the problem derives, not from any effort to impose modern culture on the text, but from the text itself. Commentators were struggling with this issue long before the women's liberation movement began.

We must remember that the challenge is not to come up with some theory that is merely consistent with these passages. That would be to add to the Bible. No, the true challenge is to state an interpretation of the passage that is both based on the passage and consistent with all scripture. God does not have a book of rules that is outside the Bible and that is only hinted at within its pages. Indeed, the only principles that we are accountable for are those *in* the Bible.

With these limitations in minds, let's consider how to interpret this passage:

B. Overriding Principles.

Let's first remember that our relationship with God as Christians is defined by the overriding principles of love and grace. God doesn't just make up arbitrary rules and impose them on us. It is, therefore, entirely proper to ask if our usual way of reading this passage actually makes sense.

For example, if it is disgraceful and wrong for a woman to speak in the worship assembly, wouldn't it be equally disgraceful and wrong for her to speak in a Sunday School class? Most Churches of Christ prohibit female speech in the assembly but permit—and even encourage—female questions and discussion in a classroom setting. I mean, Paul was particularly clear that women are not to ask questions—but we traditionally only allow question asking in Sunday School. We don't even allow men to ask questions in the assembly! If there is some eternal principle prohibiting women from asking questions in the assembly, why not in Sunday School classes?

The distinction has often been suggested that women are not to speak or ask questions in a "public" setting, and the Sunday School classes are said to be "private." But this is plainly wrong. We advertise our Sunday School classes to the public just like we advertise our assemblies. Our classes are in no real sense private.

Another distinction made is that, in context, Paul is addressing the assembly, not a class, as is evident from all of 1 Corinthians 11-14. And I agree that this is true, but the answer to my question must come from more than context. It can't be *just* a rule! The question is *why* are Sunday School classes different from the assembly—if indeed they are? Why is speaking in the assembly disgraceful and speaking in a Sunday School class okay—even good?

If we can't come up with an intelligent answer to that question, we are forced to confess that we really just don't understand this command. Paul didn't just order women to remain silent. He gave reasons, and he surely meant for those reasons to be well understood by his readers.

First, Paul explains that women "must be in submission, as the Law says." We will spend some time discussing the meaning of "the Law." Plainly, Paul believes that asking questions in the assembly is unsubmitive. Now, I ask again, what makes a woman unsubmitive when she speaks—particularly when she asks a question—in the assembly but perfectly submissive when she asks a question somewhere else? What "magic," if any, does an assembly have that compels female silence?

Next, Paul states that it is "disgraceful" for a woman to "speak in the church." Why? Must women be more submissive at church than at the workplace? More submissive in the assembly than in the foyer? Is the requirement to be submissive purely about the assembly? And how can "the Law"—surely a reference to some part of the Old Testament—create a rule for the Christian assembly that doesn't apply to other gatherings of Christians? I mean, there were no comparable assemblies in Old Testament times.¹⁰⁰ (100 The synagogue, which elements of the Christian assembly are often patterned on, was not invented until after the completion of the Old Testament.)

Finally, Paul refers to the sensibilities of those from whom the "word"—meaning the gospel—originated, certainly a reference to the feelings of Jewish Christians. And what possible impact could the feelings of First Century Jewish converts have on the eternal pattern of how men and women are to relate to one another?

And what on earth does this passage have to do with love and grace? Is this just an arbitrary rule, with no real purpose, or does it somehow further the overarching command to love my neighbor?

Is Paul saying that women are too stupid or foolish to be allowed to speak before a large group? Surely not! And besides, why allow women to speak in a class of 100 members but deny her the right to speak before an assembly of 25?

And what about “ask their own husbands at home”? How does Paul intend for this to work? What about the woman who is unmarried? or whose husband is not a Christian? or whose husband wasn’t at church that day?

Notice that Paul does not tell the woman to ask the preacher about his sermon in the lobby after services—he tells her to ask her husband at home. Why not allow questions of other men in private after services? Why may she only ask her own husband?

Let’s be honest enough to admit that we have never really enforced this passage as it’s written. I’ve never attended or heard of a church that requires women to only ask questions at home of their own husbands! Indeed, we quite often encourage women to ask questions in the hallways, in the foyer, and certainly in the classroom. After all, we really encourage Bible study and it would make no sense to deny a woman the ability to sincerely inquire into the Word with the help of her fellow Christians.

C. The Status of First Century Women.

With these questions in mind, we should consider the very real possibility that Paul’s command was caused by temporary cultural circumstances that no longer apply.

There is considerable support from history that First Century Jewish and Grecian women were very uneducated and lived extremely sheltered lives. This was especially so among the Jews, who formed the core of most congregations in the church’s early history. The questioning of a teacher by such women would have been ignorant and a burden on the time of the men. Thus, the women had to be brought to a better understanding by some means other than remedial instruction before the entire congregation.

Also in support of this view is the phrase, “If she should learn¹⁰¹ anything” (¹⁰¹ KJV. The NIV incorrectly translates “inquire about” rather than “learn.”) This language seems to be a reference to the extreme lack of education and degradation of women of the day. Few women could read or write and few could have profitably participated in the Socratic debates that characterized teaching in ancient Greece and Judea. Thus, Paul begins with an “if.” He does not assume that the woman will choose to learn anything. This is not due to Paul’s sexism, but a simple recognition of the degraded state of women in those days. In fact, Paul’s encouraging of the education of women put him well out in front of society (which took nearly 2,000 years to catch up with Paul!)

Similarly, the asking of questions of a teacher could often become a confrontation. In a society where submissive women did not provoke confrontations with men (especially before an audience) such as the First Century Roman Empire, no Christian woman would have been considered moral or honoring God if she engaged in a debate with the teacher before the congregation (all or a part). “Silence” therefore refers only to the asking of questions—or more precisely, to engaging in Socratic-style debating with the teacher.

Jewish women. The ignorance of women in the First Century was not unique to the Jews, but the Jews of that time took special care to keep their women ignorant. There was a saying that wives should only be taught enough of the Torah¹⁰² to know the penalty for adultery! And there was no exaggeration in the saying. (¹⁰² The Hebrew word for the first five books of the Bible, that is, the books of Law.)

This conclusion is buttressed by history:

*In Jewish law a woman was not a person; she was a thing. She was entirely at the disposal [of] her father or of her husband. A woman was forbidden to learn the law; to instruct a woman in the law was to cast pearls before swine. Women had no part in the Synagogue service; they were shut apart in a section of the were allowed no share in the service. A man came to the Synagogue to learn; but, at the most, a woman came to hear. In the Synagogue the lesson from Scripture was read by members of the congregation; but not by women, for that would have been to lessen "the honour of the congregation." It was absolutely forbidden for a woman to teach in a school; she might not even teach the youngest children. A woman was exempt from the stated demand of the Law. It was not obligatory on her to attend the sacred feasts and festivals. Women, slaves and children were classed together. ... Rabbi Jose ben Johanan is quoted as saying, "... Everyone that talketh much with a woman causes evil to himself, and desists from the works of the Law, and his end is that he inherits Gehenna."*¹⁰³ (103 William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon—The Daily Study Bible* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, Pa., 2nd ed. 1960), page 77.)

Barclay also notes that among the Jews, a strict follower of the Jewish *Talmud*¹⁰⁴ would not even speak to his own sister in public. (¹⁰⁴ A compilation of the traditional laws of the Jews.)

That Paul had the Jews especially in mind is evidenced by his exclamation at the end of the paragraph, "Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?" Certainly the word of God originated with the Jews. It had reached many other nations, but in the church's early history, the other churches were largely either Jewish or had a large Jewish component. Thus, the "disgrace" referred to by Paul was particularly in the eyes of the Jewish members of the congregation, the people from whom the word of God originated.

It would seem, therefore, that there is ample evidence in the text that Paul had concluded that preservation of unity and fellowship with the Jewish members and congregations demanded that women take a submissive role in certain church services.

Grecian women. Corinth was a very cosmopolitan city, being a major port and a Roman colony. Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans and then rebuilt as a colony. But the city was squarely in the middle of Greece, and all north-south land traffic had to go through Corinth. Moreover, Corinth was an important east-west port city, making it one of the Empire's premier commercial centers. By the First Century, Corinthian culture was predominantly Greek, but highly mixed. Due to its wealth and vigorous trade, Corinth had also become notoriously immoral. The city worshipped Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and her temple had 1,000 temple prostitutes who plied their trade on the streets of the city. Immorality was not only common, it was considered a religious duty!

Osburn quotes the Grecian historian Plutarch, a near contemporary of Paul: "Not only the arm but the voice of a modest woman ought to be kept from the public, and she should feel shame at being heard, as at being stripped. ... She should speak either to, or through, her husband."¹⁰⁵ (¹⁰⁵ Plutarch, *Conjugal Precepts* 31.)

Barclay comments,

The respectable Greek woman lived a very confined life. She lived in her own quarters into which no one but her husband came. She did not even appear at meals. She never at any time appeared on the street alone: she never went to any public assembly, still less did she ever speak or take any active part in such an assembly. The fact is that if in a Greek town Christian women had taken an active and a speaking and a teaching part in the work of the Christian Church, the Church would inevitably have gained the reputation of being the resort of loose and immoral women.¹⁰⁶ (¹⁰⁶ Barclay, *ibid.*)

The risk of being considered immoral was, therefore, very real. Moreover, to appease the sensibilities of the various levels of society, especially the Jews, strict rules would have to be followed.¹⁰⁷

(107 Ferguson disputes this view of First Century women. He concedes the low estate of Jewish women of this age, but points out, “There were plenty of priestesses in Greco-Roman religions, and one historian of ancient Rome, Carcopino, describes a women’s emancipation movement in Rome in the first century.”

Ferguson misses some key points. First, the fact that there was an emancipation movement for women plainly tells us that women felt the need to be emancipated. Moreover, there is no evidence that the movement succeeded. Recall the Women’s Suffrage Movement of the early 20th Century. Women actually prevailed, gaining the right to vote, and yet continued to suffer severe discrimination for decades thereafter. If a successful emancipation movement doesn’t necessarily grant women equal legal rights, plainly a *failed* emancipation movement hardly proves that women were emancipated.

Finally, the fact that women could serve as priestesses in pagan religions doesn’t indicate emancipation in their roles as housewives—or even as priestesses. In fact, many of the priestesses were little more than prostitutes, certainly not an elevated status. As Barclay writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, “To that temple [of Aphrodite], there were attached one thousand priestesses who were sacred prostitutes, and at evening time they descend from the Acropolis and plied their trade on the streets of Corinth”

Thus, the silence commanded is the avoidance of such speech as might open the women to charges of moral laxity as measured by the culture of the community. Thus, singing, speaking in unison, and such would not be prohibited. Neither would prayer and prophecy. However, the direct addressing of a man, where a woman engages in conversation or debate with someone else’s husband, would be a violation of propriety. This conclusion is supported by Paul’s statement that such speech is disgraceful.”¹⁰⁸ (108 Verse 35)

“**Own.**” Notice the word “own.”¹⁰⁹ (109 Verse 35. KJV fails to translate *idios* (“own”), but most modern translations do.) Wives are to ask their *own* husbands at home. *Strong’s Dictionary* translates *idios*, the word translated “own,” as “pertaining to self, i.e. one’s own; by implication, private or separate.” Thus, the meaning is not just that the wife should ask her husband at home, but that she should ask her *own* husband and not someone else’s husband!

The command is thus a prohibition on conversation between a woman and another woman’s husband. It would have been unseemly in First Century society for married women to speak freely to married men. Such consorting would have opened the church up to accusations of unchastity.

Summary. In context, and taking into account the emphasis on a woman speaking to her *own* husband, the command is a prohibition on speaking to another woman’s husband. It is, therefore, a command founded on the appearance of immorality in a society where women were not permitted to speak in public to men other than their own husbands. Paul’s command is therefore a reference to local cultural standards.

The sense of Paul’s teaching can be seen in an example from the mission field:

My mother used to compare the situation in Corinth to the one she and my father faced in northern China. Back in the 1920s when they were first to bring God’s message to that forgotten area, they found women with bound feet who seldom left their homes and who, unlike the men, had never in their whole lives attended a public meeting or a class. They had never been told as little girls, “Now you just sit still and listen to the teacher.” Their only concept of an assembly was a family feast where everyone talked at once.

When these women came to my parents’ church and gathered on the women’s side of the sanctuary, they thought this was a chance to catch up on the news with their neighbors and to ask questions about the story of Jesus they were hearing. Needless to say, along with babies crying and toddlers running about, the women’s section got rather noisy! Add to that the temptation for the women to shout questions to their husbands across the aisle, and you can imagine the chaos. As my mother patiently tried to tell the women that they should listen first and chitchat or ask questions later, she would mutter under her breath, “Just like Corinth; it just couldn’t be more like Corinth.”¹¹⁰ (110 Kari Torjesen Malcolm, *Women at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity, 1982), pages 73-74, as quoted by John Temple Bristow, *What Paul Really Said About Women* (San Francisco, CA; HarperCollins, 1991), page 64.)

D. Some Definitions.

With this cultural background in mind, let's search out the meaning of a few words and phrases.

“Speak.” The Greek word translated “speak” throughout the chapter, *lalein*, takes its exact meaning from the context, and can refer to anything from silent meditation (v. 28) to disruptive speech of about any kind. There is nothing in the word itself to indicate what kind of speech is in mind. However, the verb is in present tense, indicating continuous action. Thus, Paul is saying something like “they are not allowed to *continually speak*.”¹¹¹ (111 Osburn, *Women in the Church 2*, p. 199, citing F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (Eerdmans 1971), p. 135. The present indicative refers specifically to continuing action, while the aorist infinitive indicates neither point time nor continuing action.)

“Silent.” The Greek word translated “silent” in 1 Corinthians 14:34, *sigao*, does not necessarily mean “not speak at all.” Rather, the word may mean nothing more than “be quiet” or even “keep a secret.” The italicized portions of the following verses are all the other occurrences of the word in the Greek New Testament:

Luke 9:36 When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples *kept this to themselves*, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

Luke 20:26 They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became *silent*.

Acts 12:17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to *be quiet* and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the brothers about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

Acts 15:12-13 The whole assembly became *silent* as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Rom. 16:25 Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the *mystery* hidden for long ages past

1 Cor. 14:28 If there is no interpreter, the speaker should *keep quiet* in the church and speak to himself and God.

1 Cor. 14:30 And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should *stop*.

1 Cor. 14:34 [W]omen should *remain silent* in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.

Notice that in its normal use in the New Testament, *sigao* refers to a temporary silence, typically the courteous silence of not interrupting while another speaks. In 1 Corinthians 14, *sigao* is used in verses 28 and 30 to refer, not to total silence, but to abstaining from rude or inconsiderate speech.¹¹² (112 *Sigao* is a synonym of *siopao*, frequently translated as “keep one’s peace.”)

In verse 28 Paul told the tongue speakers to “keep quiet [*sigao*] in the church,” a phrase not significantly different from verse 34’s “remain silent in the churches.” And yet we readily see that Paul did not mean for tongue speakers to be completely silent, only that they should not speak in tongues when no interpreter is present. Other speaking by those with the gift of tongues is not banned by the “keep quiet” command.

Similarly, in verse 30 Paul tells the prophets to stop speaking, literally to “be silent [*sigao*].” But this command to silence clearly only means to stop talking long enough to let another speak. Thus, in each case, in context, *sigao* means “refrain from inconsiderate speech” of a certain type.

Thus, when Paul tells women to “remain silent” because they “must be in submission,” we should understand that the command to silence is limited to speech that is not submissive. After all, the Law only requires submission of women, as complements for their husbands, not silence. Women should be silent to the extent that speaking would, in the circumstance and at the time, violate the command to submission, that is, their role as suitable complements. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find women told to be silent in the presence of men.

But prophets and tongue speakers are given the same limited command—not that they should not use their gifts to God’s glory, but that common courtesy and mutual submission of Christians to one another requires the taking of turns, using gifts in a manner that edifies, and behaving decently and orderly.

Clearly, where considerations of courtesy and orderliness do not prevent speaking, tongue speakers and prophets are free to speak, even as stated in verse 28, “in the church.” Likewise, in a culture and place where a woman may speak in the presence of men without causing a scandal or being perceived as immoral, the command to silence has no application. This interpretation will become clearer as we proceed more deeply into the scripture.

“The Law.” Paul’s reference to the Law as supporting his command is either (a) the Law of Moses, (b) the curse pronounced on women in Genesis 3, or (c) a reference to the “one flesh” relationship that God created, described in Genesis 2. No one has plausibly suggested any other possibility.

But Paul cannot be arguing from the Law of Moses, since the Law of Moses never commands women to be silent in the presence of men or even to be submissive to men. And Paul cannot be arguing from the curse in Genesis 3, as many would suggest. This is a curse and not a command and is the result of sin, not a pattern for righteous living. Thus, the only possible explanation is also the most appealing explanation. Paul is referring to the command that husbands and wives be one flesh and the role of women as suitable complements—for their husbands.

“Women.” The Greek word translated “women” is *gune*, which can be translated “wives” or as “women”—the distinction can only be found in the context. Translating *gune* as “wife” solves a number of problems and has much to commend it. First, only a wife can ask her husband at home. A widow, divorcee, or other unmarried woman could hardly do so. Second, the Law (Genesis 1 and 2) imposes submission on *wives*, and then only to their husbands. Nowhere does the Law require all women to be in submission to all men. Genesis 2 only talks about husbands and wives. Eve was Adam’s helpmeet, not a helpmeet to all men.

“Inquire.” In the New International Version, Paul is translated as saying, “If they wish to inquire about something ...,” but the King James Versions translates, “And if they will learn anything” In this case, the King James Version has it right. For reasons mentioned earlier, Paul makes it clear that while women are certainly permitted to learn, he is unwilling to assume that they will.

With these definitions in mind, let’s try our hand at a clearer translation:

As in all the congregations of the saints, *wives* should not *speak in a way considered rude or immoral* in the churches. They are not allowed to [so] speak, but must be in submission, as *Genesis 2* says [about wives being suitable complements for their husbands]. If they want to *learn* about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a *wife* to speak in the church. Did the word of God originate with you [rather than the Jews]? Or are you the only people it has reached [the gospel has reached many people who consider female questioning of men very immoral]?

E. Cultural Limitation.

Doesn't this passage remind you of the abuses of the Lord's Supper discussed in 1 Corinthians 11? Paul commanded the Corinthians to eat "at home" (1 Cor. 11:34). We readily understand that this is a response to the local situation in Corinth and not a universal rule, and yet it is phrased very similarly to the command to silence in 1 Corinthians 14:34.

Also, Paul's reliance on arguments using such phrases as "as in all the congregations of the saints" and "it is disgraceful" are very similar to his statements made in 1 Corinthians 11 dealing with veils. We readily acknowledge that such arguments show that only temporary cultural concerns were at issue when veils are under discussion. We should hold to the same standards here. Note the close comparison:

1 Cor. 11:14-16 Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a *disgrace* to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, *we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.*

1 Cor. 14: 33b-36 *As in all the congregations of the saints*, women should remain 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; for it is *disgraceful* for a woman to speak in the church. Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?

The same traditionalist commentators who insist that "As in all the congregations of the saints" in chapter 14 makes the command to be silent an eternal rule will argue that "we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God" applied only in the First Century so that veils are no longer required¹¹³. (¹¹³ D. A. Carson suggests an alternative interpretation in his excellent *Showing the Spirit* (Baker Books 1987), pages 129-131. Carson first argues that the First Century gift of prophecy differs from the Old Testament gift, because (i) the First Century gift had to be tested (pages 91-100), noting 1 Cor. 14:29 (interpreting "weigh" as evaluate) and 1 Thess. 5:19-21); (ii) Paul treated New Testament prophets as inferior to the apostles (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:37-38); (iii) the latest epistles, rather than encouraging reliance on the prophets who survived the apostles, urged reliance on apostolic teaching ("Guard the deposit!" "Keep the faith once delivered to the saints!" "Return to what was from the beginning!" 2 Tim.; Jude; 1 John, respectively); (iv) in some cases, Paul specifically refused to follow the counsel of an acknowledged prophet (Acts 21:4) and another prophet inaccurately prophesied Paul's fate (Acts 21:10-11—the Jews didn't bind Paul, the Romans did; the Jews didn't turn Paul over to the Romans but attempted to lynch him). Accordingly, Carson suggests that in vv. 33-35, Paul directs that while women may prophesy, they may not engage in the questioning of prophets in order to test them. Without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing with Carson's theory, it is not inconsistent with the above theory. After all, Paul's reason for so limiting women may well have been cultural, as a woman's testing of a male prophet by interrogation certainly would have been seen as highly disrespectful, even immoral, in Corinthian society.

F. Conclusions.

These considerations aren't true in the United States today. It is not at all uncommon for me to teach classes having women with more formal Bible education than I have or who have published more Bible-based literature than I have. We have blessedly advanced far beyond the First Century in educating women, and only the worst of bigots would bar women from asking questions on the basis of this passage, which is why our tradition permits such questions. *We already* let women ask questions—so long as it is in Sunday School class and not in the worship service, when no one asks questions anyway.

When Paul tells women to be "in submission" in verse 34, he is not telling them to be in submission to their husbands or to men in general. Rather, they are to be in submission to the requirement of decency and orderliness. In the Greek, "as the Law says" does not modify "not allowed to speak" but "submit yourselves." There is, of course, no command in Genesis or the Law of Moses compelling

women to be silent. Rather, the Law (Genesis 2) requires submission, but this is little different from the submission that Paul later commands in 1 Corinthians 16:16: “submit yourselves to one another.”¹¹⁴ (114 See Osburn, *Women in the Church 1*, pages 108-109.) And this submission ultimately flows from the fact that we are all, men and women, created in God’s image, as discussed earlier.

This reasoning, rooted deeply in Paul’s own words, tells us that the command to be silent in 1 Corinthians 14 is no longer binding today in American culture. We have yet to study 1 Timothy 2:11-15, and many advocates of the silence rule would concede that 1 Corinthians is not a sound basis for commanding female silence, but they instead rely on the commands in 1 Timothy.

I am not the first within the Church to reach this conclusion. David Lipscomb, a co-founder of the *Gospel Advocate* and the Nashville Bible School (now David Lipscomb University) and long-time editor of the *Gospel Advocate* stated,

Yet, women have the right to teach those who know less than themselves; Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos (Acts 18:24- 26). So, I am sure that a woman may teach the Bible to young and old, male and female, at the meeting house, at home, at a neighbor’s house, on Sunday or Monday or any other day of the week, if they know less than she does, if she will do it in a quiet, modest, womanly way.¹¹⁵ (115 M. C. Kurfees, ed., *Questions Answered by David Lipscomb and E. G. Sewell* (McQuiddy 1921), page 736, quoted by Rowland, page 140. Rather inconsistently, another book quotes Lipscomb as saying in the same text, “I cannot write it in simpler words, plainer, or put in a connection that would make it easier to be understood. ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches ...’ I do not know how to add a word that can make it clearer, more direct, or more forcible. One who can explain that away can explain away anything I can write.” p. 729, quoted by *Osburn, Women in the Church 2*, p. 189. Perhaps Lipscomb made a distinction between the formal assembly and other speaking opportunities)

Lipscomb’s long tenure as editor of the *Gospel Advocate* made him the leading thinker within the Churches of Christ at the time they split from the instrumental churches and for many years thereafter.

Burton Coffman, the author of a series of commentaries on the entire New Testament and long-time minister of the Manhattan Church of Christ, concludes,

[T]o blow this up to a universal law that no woman might open her mouth in a church service is simply contrary to all reason.¹¹⁶ (116 Coffman, page 240.)

The late George W. DeHoff, a well-respected preacher, leader, evangelist, educator, publisher, and scholar, states,

No verse in the Bible teaches that women must teach God’s *word at home, or in private*, those limitations having been added by false teachers. Any teaching that does not usurp authority over a man does not violate this passage.¹¹⁷ (117 *Sermons on First Corinthians* (The Christian Press, Murfreesboro, Tenn. 1947) page 99, quoted with approval by Coffman, page 243.)

The traditional view is also disputed by J. W. McGarvey, who is certainly the most respected of the late 19th Century Restoration leaders and second only to Alexander Campbell in the quality of his scholarship among the 19th Century Church leaders:

The powers of woman have become so developed, and her privileges have been so extended in gospel lands, that it is no longer shameful for her to speak in public; but the failing of one reason is not the cessation of both. The Christian conscience has therefore interpreted Paul’s rule rightly when it applies it generally and admits of exceptions. ...

The gift of prophecy no longer exists; but, by the law of analogy, *those women who have a marked ability, either for exhortation or instruction, are permitted to speak in the churches.* ... The law is permanent, but the application of it may vary. If man universally gives woman permission to speak, she is free from the law in this respect.¹¹⁸ (118 *Commentary on First Corinthians* (The Standard Publishing Co.,

Cincinnati, Ohio 1916) page 143, quoted approvingly by Coffman, *ibid*, and DeHoff, *ibid*. McGarvey's commentary on 1 Corinthians has also been republished as part of the Gospel Advocate commentary series.)

More recently, Carroll D. Osburn, Professor of New Testament at Abilene Christian University, and among the Church's foremost living Bible scholars, concluded,

Far from being intolerant, Paul neither teaches nor suggests in this text anything regarding hierarchicalism or female subjection. ... Paul's corrective does not ban women from speaking in worship. ...

Referring, as it does, to a very specific problem of disruptive questions by these women, 1 Cor. 14:34-35 teaches that these particular wives, like the uncontrolled tongue-speakers and prophets at Corinth, must defer to the assembly by voluntarily yielding to orderliness. The general principle that is to be applied to contemporary church life is that decorum is mandatory for all in the public assembly, without regard for gender.¹¹⁹ (119 Osburn, *Women in the Church 1*, pages 110-111.)

Thus, we see from writings from 1916, 1947, 1977, and 1994 that well-respected and prominent commentators within the Churches of Christ have rejected the notion that women may only speak in private gatherings. The commentaries vary in the details of the conclusions that they draw, but they each disagree with conventional thinking within the Church today. Coffman goes so far as to say, with respect to the requirement that women not ask questions but be silent,

What about the woman whose husband is an ignoramus, an unbeliever, or an open enemy of God and all religion; should *she* comply with this rule? Until it is affirmed that she should, it is a sin to make this rule universal.

But of course we *do* make this rule universal. Isn't it amazing that anyone who supposes that a woman may speak in an assembly will be condemned and "marked" as a heretic while many of our best scholars do not agree with the traditional view now being insisted on by so many? Moreover, isn't it also amazing that we are so intimidated by the right wing of the Church that only the rarest of congregations would actually engage in the practices approved by Lipscomb, McGarvey, DeHoff, Coffman, and Osburn (among very many others)? In fact, precious few of our members are even aware that many of our best scholars have taken these positions. Instead, the current thinking of many is that anyone allowing women to speak in assembly is *per se* a liberal and not one of us.

The assembly should be a reflection of our seven-day a week relationship with God. We aren't held to higher standards Sunday morning than the rest of the week! We can't put on show for God—He won't be fooled! Whatever submission is required Sunday morning is required all the time.

Isn't it very implausible that God invented an eternal rule for women in the assembly that applies nowhere else? If women are inferior or subordinate in the assembly due to the curse of Eve, then they are inferior or subordinate in private worship, during church committee meetings, at Sunday School class, in the work place, and in the home. God did not curse Eve only between 10:30 and 11:30 on Sunday mornings! We are left with the conclusion that the command to be silent was a temporary expedient and is not binding in current American society.

I started by pointing out that this passage must be read in light of the overriding principles of love and grace. Have we done that? I think so. Why were women to refrain from certain speech? Because to do so would have subjected them to accusations of immorality, bringing shame to their husbands and to Christ. Paul's command was far from arbitrary—it is simply one of many examples of Christians yielding their freedom for a greater cause.