

## A Word About Women from the King of the Church

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Transcript of sermon preached by Pastor David Silversides on Sunday, January 5, 1997

We turn in the word of God to 1 Corinthians 14. 1 Corinthians 14, and this morning we reach verses 34 & 35. And they read:

“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. 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.”

Amen. Thus far we read the word of God.

And our theme this morning can be summed up as: “A Word About Women from the King of the Church.” “A Word About Women from the King of the Church.”

The words of our text deal with what has proved a very sensitive issue in many circles. That the world should balk at these words is not surprising. An ungodly world is always inclined to think that they know better than God. But among the people of God, the subject matter of these verses should not be a hot potato at all. It should not be. It should not be that the very mention of these verses should arouse a strong feeling and even antagonism for the simple reason that these verses are part of the word of God. And the people of God profess to accept the whole Bible as the word of God. When we take the Lord’s Supper, one of the things we acknowledge is that the word of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, are the only infallible rule of faith and practice.

And so at the outset, before we get embroiled in the text itself, I want to raise the spiritual tone of the subject by simply asking you to answer in your heart one very simple question: Are you happy that these verses are in the Scriptures? Are you happy that these verses are in the Holy Scriptures?

I’ll address that question not simply to the women, but to the men as well. Because men, perhaps out of a misguided sense of chivalry, are often equally offended and niggled by these words of Holy Scripture, apparently hearing them as something of an affront to their women-folk.

And so it has to be said straightaway, if you object to these words, your argument is not with me and it is not with the apostle Paul as a man; your argument is with God Himself. So let us then at the outset say, if these words niggle us, let us put away all such resentment because it is never good to fight against God. Neither you nor I will ever benefit in the least degree from fighting against the word of God. It is not good for you. As well, it is dishonoring to God. So men and women, if you feel niggled by these verses, seek grace to mortify that resentment, because it is directed against God Himself, and it is not good.

And so to the text. First of all, **the silence required**. “Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak.” It is an unqualified silence. Some have sought to suggest that the apostle is speaking of disorderly chattering, but there is not the slightest indication in the passage that that is so. And I believe it is an insult to women to

suggest that the apostle had to speak to women about disorderly chattering and not to men. Disorderly chattering is wrong in the worship of God, whether it is men or women. And there is no reason whatever to think that in Corinth the women were especially guilty of such irreverence.

And, in fact, the setting of the verse gives entirely different reasons for the silence required. There is no possibility of deriving from the text the idea that it is simply disorderly chatter that is in view. The text doesn't say it, and it gives quite different reasons for the silence that is required.

The immediate context is prophecy and tongue-speaking. That's what the apostle has been dealing with really throughout chapters 12, 13, and especially chapter 14. And he is still dealing with it. Because he will say in verse 39: "Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues." He is saying that not only must the tongue-speakers and the prophets observe due order. For example, in verse 29, "Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge." But he is also saying, that when women possess these gifts, they are still not to exercise them in the public congregation at all.

So that in the apostolic age, when these gifts genuinely existed, some women genuinely had these gifts. And yet he's saying, gifts or not, in the church they must keep silent. Women were not to prophesy in the church, even though some women undoubtedly had the gift of prophesy. According to the prophet Joel, fulfilled in Acts 2, "Your daughters shall prophesy." But the apostle is saying, gift or no gift, they must be silent in the church. The prophesy in the church is to be through men, and a maximum of three at that.

That is why the much-disputed passage in 1 Corinthians 11, verse 5, cannot mean that women were right to prophesy in the church. It is absolutely impossible that that verse means that women were to prophesy in the church. The verse reads: "But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with *her* head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven." The apostle cannot mean that the women were to prophesy, because in chapter 14 it is prophecy that is immediately in view when he says, "Let the women keep silence in the churches."

Chapter 11, verse 5, as we said before, could be using the terms *praying* or *prophesying* as simply equivalent to worship in general. Or else, more likely, the apostle is referring to the existing practice in Corinth only to correct that practice now in chapter 14.

An alternative view that has been brought to my attention recently, is that the apostle sees the headcovering and the silence as going together. And what he is saying is, if a woman will not cover her head, then let her go the whole hog. It is unseemly for a woman to have her head uncovered and to prophesy in the church. If she won't accept the sign of acceptance of male leadership [i.e., the headcovering], then I suppose she won't accept the practice of it either. At any rate, chapter 11, verse 5, cannot mean that women were to audibly prophesy, and so it cannot mean that they were to audibly lead the congregation in prayer either.

And so the immediate setting of our text is telling us that women were not to prophesy or speak in tongues in the church, even though they have the requisite gifts for that.

But then the apostle develops the principle in verse 35: “And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands [or their men] at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

So he develops the principle. If the women are not to prophesy in the church, how much further does this principle go? How absolute is the silence that is required? And the apostle applies the requirement of silence even to the asking of questions.

Now these are not my words; they are the words of Scripture.

So he is saying that if there was scope in their meetings, or in some of their meetings, for asking questions, the men could ask questions, but the women could not. Now, asking questions, is that form of verbal initiative which is most compatible with submission and least expressive of leadership. If there is one form of speaking, taking the initiative to speak, which is least expressive of leadership, it is asking questions. And yet the apostle says, “No. The women must not do it.”

And so when the apostle says that the women are not to speak, it means just that. The term *speak* includes all solo utterance. In verse 34: “It is not permitted unto them to speak.” Verse 35: “It is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

The question of ability doesn’t even enter into it. There were women who did have the gift of prophesy—no doubt about it. But the fact that the woman has the ability to do something, does not mean that she should do it. It does not mean that what gifts she has have to find expression in the public worship of the church of God.

So the question of ability is actually irrelevant. Able or not able, they must not do it. And so not only is the woman not to prophesy... And the gift of prophecy is not with us today. But she is not to expound the Scriptures.

1 Timothy, chapter 2, and verse 11-14: “11 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. 12 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. 13 For Adam was first formed, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”

I’m sure that we can all think of women we know who are well-versed in the Scriptures and who would seem to our eyes to be well qualified to instruct the people of God. Whether that is so or not does not alter the word of God. The question of whether we think a woman is competent or not does not come into the issue; it is the word of God that is final.

Nor indeed is she to be the audible leader in prayer in the church of God. In 1 Timothy chapter 2 and verse 8 we read: “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”

That word *men* is actually the same word as is rendered *husbands* in our text. It is the idea of the men-folk in our text, the men at home, husbands included. But here in 1 Timothy 2, verse 8,

it is definitely the men who are to lead the church of God in prayer. There are several reasons for that, for saying that. First of all, in the Greek language there are two words that can be translated *men*. One of them, the word *anthropos* means man as opposed to the animal world and the rest of creation, mankind. And it is that word that is used earlier in the passage. So in verse 1 in 1 Timothy 2, we are told that “supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks, be made for all *men*.” And it is that word that is used, *men* in the sense of human beings as a whole. In verse 4: “who will have all men to be saved.” And again it is that word for mankind as opposed to the animal world: *anthropos*. Then, in verse 5, “for there is one God and one mediator between God and men.” Again, *anthropos*, man as opposed to the animal. “The man Christ Jesus.” Same word.

But when we come to verse 8, the apostle deliberately uses a different word. He uses the word *andras*, which is men as opposed to women. He deliberately changes the word. And you see from the context that it is men as opposed to women. “8 I will therefore that men [or, literally, “the men”] pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. 9 In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel” (1 Tim. 2:8-9), and so on.

So there is no doubt whatsoever, that in 1 Timothy 2, when the apostle is giving instructions for congregational worship, he is saying that the men must lead in the congregational prayers. This means that in all parts of worship where the whole congregation is led by one voice--as opposed to the singing of psalms and the amen at the close of prayers when all voices should be heard, “for all the people said, Amen” (1 Chronicles 16:36); in those parts of worship all the voices are to be heard. But in all those other parts of worship when the whole congregation is led by a single voice, that voice is to be the voice of a man and not of a woman.

It is not permitted to a woman to declare God’s word to men in the reading and exposition of the Scriptures in the church. Nor is the woman to act as the congregational mouthpiece in prayer to God, that is, in audibly leading the whole congregation in prayer. God prescribes how He is to be worshipped. And He has appointed that *men* are to read the Word in the congregation, *men* are to preach the Word in the congregation, and *men* are to lead the congregation in prayer to God.

Some find this disrespectful to women; it is nothing of the sort. Many women are given very honorable mention in the Scriptures—for their faith and their service to the Lord, their godliness. But public leadership in the worship of God is simply not their role, and it is not their calling.

But then, moving on. **Secondly, why it is required.** Why it is required. Why does the apostle require this?

Some say that Paul was only a man of his times. And that Paul was simply reflecting his background. Now if you say that, you don’t accept the authority of Scripture. Liberals say that because they don’t accept the authority of the Scriptures. But if we believe the Bible, we will not say, “Oh, that’s only Paul.” If we are Bible-believing Christians, we will say that the apostle Paul was speaking under the infallible inspiration of the Spirit of God.

But others say, “Yes, yes, that’s right. But the apostle was simply saying that this must be done because he didn’t want the Christians to give needless offense because of the culture of the day.” The argument is, in that day and age, women were in the background, not to the fore, and the apostle was simply saying, “For the time being, not as an absolute thing, but given the day and age in which we live, then it is best that the women keep silent.”

But the text doesn’t say that. It just doesn’t say that. There is not the slightest shred of evidence in the text that the apostle is simply making a concession to the times in which he lived. In fact, the apostle Paul *never* in his teaching on the different roles of men and women brings in merely temporary considerations; he never does that. Wherever the male / female distinction and role differences are discussed, he never bases it on the fact that—“Well, it is not the done thing in the society around us”.

And so it is here. His reasons are as follows. First of all, **the law**. In verse 34, “*they are commanded* to be under obedience [and subjection], as also saith the law.” The apostle is saying that the Old Testament clearly teaches that the woman is to be in subjection to the man. He expands that a little back in 1 Timothy 2, to which we have already referred. 1 Timothy 2, verse 13: “13 For Adam was first formed, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”

Now what he is saying here is that the fact that men are to lead and women are to follow in the church is evident from two things: First of all, the created order. God could have created everything in a flash; but He didn’t. He created it in six days. And when He created man—male and female—He made a man, and then He made a woman. He did it in an order. God doesn’t have to follow any order. He doesn’t have to do anything by process; but He did. He made Adam. And then, of Adam, He made Eve. And that was to show that the man was made first, then the woman, because the man was to lead and the woman to be the helpmate of the man. That’s the created order.

And then in the garden of Eden in Genesis 3, when man sinned, apart from all the other elements of sin in that first human transgression, there was this: That the woman led in sin, when she should have followed in righteousness. And so in Genesis 3:16, the created order is confirmed and emphasized after the fall. “Unto the woman the Lord said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

And so the apostle is saying that right from the beginning of the Old Testament it is clear that the woman is to be under the loving leadership and headship of the man. The man is responsible to lead. He has authority, limited authority to use under God for the welfare of the woman. But the point to be stressed here is that the appeal in our text is not to anything temporary—it isn’t to culture; it isn’t to what the norms were in Greek society or Jewish society; it was to the Old Testament Word of God.

And then in verse 35, he uses another expression. He says, “It is a shame.” “It is a shame.” “A shame for women to speak in the church.” It is the same word as is used in chapter 11 and verse 6: “For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.” And the idea of “a shame” is something unnatural, ugly, and deformed. So he is talking about something that is unnatural. And he is

saying that for a woman to speak in church is unnatural; it is a deforming of the created order; it is a pushing out of shame of that which is natural and beautiful according to God's created order. So he is not saying that it is just *culturally* inappropriate; he is saying, it's a distortion of created order; it's ugly.

And so public worship is to be led by men. And this insistence on the women being silent stands today as surely as in the first century. And why should the men be so unkind and so unloving as to expect women to do what God does not? Why should the men be so unkind, so unloving, as to expect their women to do what God does not expect them to do?

And that brings us **thirdly to when it is required**. When it is required.

Verse 34: "Let your women keep silence in the churches."

Verse 35: "for it is a shame for women to speak in the church."

Whilst male leadership is a principle of wide application, this specific insistence on silence relates to congregational worship. There are some things permissible in the domestic realm, for example, that are not permissible in the assembled congregation. The women may ask questions at home, but not in the Christian assembly, the church.

Acts 21:9 tells us that Philip's four daughters prophesied. They had a gift of prophecy that presumably exercised in a private way, but not in the church. Aquila and Priscilla were involved in helping Apollos to learn the way of the Lord more perfectly, but Priscilla would not speak in the church.

Now this doesn't mean that this created order is to be ignored in domestic, non-church settings. But this demand for complete silence must apply in all the public assemblies of God's people. All the public gatherings of the people of God must follow this Biblical injunction.

What does that mean for us? It applies to all those gatherings for worship intended for the whole congregation or as many as are able to attend. That is the minimum. It must apply to all gathering for congregational worship, even those where not everybody is able to get there. Every meeting where the whole congregation is called upon to gather for worship, this rule must apply.

It applies to our Sabbath services. It must apply to the prayer meeting, because the prayer meeting is simply another meeting of the congregation for worship, at which more time is given to one particular part of worship—that is, prayer. But basically it is the congregation gathering for worship. The fact that more time is spent in prayer than the other parts of worship, compared with the Sabbath services, makes no difference. The distinction we make between a service and a prayer meeting, is a distinction of convenience. It isn't a distinction that you find in the Scriptures. We call it a prayer meeting simply to indicate that at that particular meeting for worship more time than at other services is spent in prayer. But it is the congregation meeting for worship under the jurisdiction of the elders of the church. And so it must apply to the Sabbath services; it must apply to what we call the prayer meeting.

It must apply to congregational worship, at missionary meetings, and the annual business meeting. When a missionary shows slides of his work, that's not an act of worship, of course it is not. But the psalmody and the prayers and the reading of the Word prior to it *is* part of congregational worship. It is congregational worship followed by a time of receiving information about the work of the gospel in other places.

So whenever the whole congregation is gathered for worship, as we said many months ago, it is in all these situations, irrespective of what building we are meeting in—whether it is here, or in the hall, or in someone’s front room, or in some other place—it makes no difference. In all of these situations, just as the women should cover their heads, so also when one voice leads all, it must be the voice of a man and not of a woman.

And that brings us, **fourthly**, to **why it matters**. Why it matters.

Perhaps you feel, “Well, this really is making a mountain out of a mole hill. Does it really matter?” Why make an issue of these things?

Because the Word of God says so.

And that is the only reason.

I wouldn’t bother you with any of these things for any other reason than that the word of God says so. Christ said, “If ye love me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). If we are Christians, we love the Lord Jesus Christ, whether we’re men or whether we’re women. If we are Christians, we love the Lord Jesus Christ, and we will want to do what He says in His own church. I dearly hope that we all have a vision of Christ’s headship over the Church. That He is the head of the Church; He is at the right hand of God; and when we gather to worship, we want to do what He says in the Scriptures.

He said, “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17). Christ is glorified when His people own His kingship over them. Ah, but you say, “There are churches that don’t do what you are saying.” And so there are. And you go further, you say, “There are churches that ordain women to the ministry.” And so there are. What are we to make of this? Denominations that ordain women to the ministry may well have many godly ministers and members within them, but, as a body, they have declared war on the King of the Church.

You say, “Oh, it’s not a big issue.” It’s clear in Scripture. And the rejection of Biblical teaching on the male / female distinction and roles is a rejection of the word of the Lord. And so when a church says, “Never mind what’s in 1 Corinthians 14 or 1 Timothy 2. We know better. We ordain women. We have women in our pulpits to preach the word of God to the people,” they are declaring war on King Jesus. And they are saying, as a body, “We will not have this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14).

That is what any church is doing when they defy the word of God. They may be saying on the one hand, “Christ is the King of the church.” But in practice they are saying, “No, He isn’t! We are!”

You see, the issue of ordination of women is ultimately a clash between Biblical Christianity and manmade religion. That is what is behind it. A church that rejects the Biblical teaching on male leadership, will reject the Biblical doctrine of salvation in due course, as well. If 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 can be ignored, so can John 3:16, as well. Because if the Scriptures cannot be relied upon to tell us what we are to do in the church—and what men are to do and what women are to do—if they can’t be relied upon to tell us that, they can’t be relied upon to tell us the way to heaven either. We must rely upon the word of God to tell us the way to heaven and to tell us how to behave on earth.

Now I realize it is the easiest thing in the world for you to ignore what I have been saying. And one of the easiest ways to do it is to say, "Well, that's just our minister. He's got some thing about keeping the women in their place, keeping them down, and that's all there is to it." The problem with that response is just this: It isn't true. It isn't true. And you know it's not true. The reason I am preaching these things to you is not because of any hobby horse of mine at all. I'm only interested in what the Scriptures teach—no more and no less, and I hope that's true of all of you as well.

One last reason why it's important: Because men must not be allowed to shirk. Men must not be allowed to shirk. If women may not lead, then men must lead. Wherever there are women willing to lead, there are usually men willing to let them. And they must not be allowed to get away with it.

You see in verse 35. It says, "if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands [or their men] at home." Now that doesn't rule out anyone asking the minister questions after the meeting is over. Ministers love to be asked questions by people who want to know what the Scriptures teach. But, in the church, the women were not allowed to do so. But when they got home, they were to ask their men. And the assumption must be that at least some of the time the men were able to give them answers. In other words, Christian men should know the Scriptures so if their wives or their daughters ask them questions at home, or if anyone in the family asks them questions, they can at least some of the time give them answers.

When leadership functions are left to the women, the men sit back. And then when new elders are needed in the church, where are they? Where are they? Where are the qualified men? They're not there. They have been carried along by willing women. And so the men aren't there. And that's why in many congregations, they are struggling to find men who can lead the people of God.

The Church needs Christian men who lead in the home, who lead in the worship in the home. And from among these domestic leaders, there will arise those who can lead in the church, as well. And the church will never be strong until it is so.

And children, and especially the boys growing up in a Christian church, they ought to see the example of Christian men who can lead the people of God.

So then in closing. Let me exhort you to love this part of the word of God, along with all the rest. Love these verses the way you love all the other parts of Scripture. They are just as good, just as true, just as reliable, and just as beneficial, when received into the heart.

Love these verses of Scripture. Love all of Scripture. Love them out of love to that God who caused these words to be written for our good. "Thy word is very pure. Therefore, thy servant loveth it" (Ps. 119:140). Amen.