

Women in Ministry: Re-Reading 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 in the 21st Century Context

*Emmanuel Olujide Adetunji*¹ and *Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi*²

^{1,2} Department of Religious and Intercultural Studies, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria

Correspondence email: afolaranmi.adebayo@lcu.edu.ng

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Abstract

First Corinthians 14:33-35 reveals one of the many controversies about the roles of women in ministry in the church today. Many scholars have given diverse interpretations of the verses. The verses have led many people including many Christian denominations to have some positions on women in ministry. The trust of this article is to explore the correct interpretation of the verses based on some historical and biblical perspectives. The work adopted the historical and biblical exegesis method. Feminism theory was also considered in the work. The work concluded that 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 should not be interpreted literally. It must be interpreted within its context. It also concluded that women have their roles to play in the world and the propagation of the gospel of Christ regardless of attempts by men to relegate them to the background.

Keywords: *Black womanism, women in 1 Corinthians 14: 33-35, women speaking in churches, controversies in the church*

Introduction

First Corinthians 14:33-35 has raised more controversy in the church today. What did Paul mean when he wrote these to the Corinthians? Are they binding on today's Christians? How should these verses be interpreted? These are the thrust of this paper. The article went into the historical and biblical perspectives of women and the implications of this. It also viewed the controversy from many points of view, and then came out with conclusions on the issue. Some would explain this away as a special command to the unruly women at Corinth to straighten up, rather than a general command to all women everywhere. But if we treat one scripture this way, what is to stop us from treating every scripture this way? Surely the New Testament is written for the whole church.

The subject of the passage is: '*The women in the churches* (plural)'. This means-'all women.' Moreover, the command is based on 'the law' which means it applies to all, rather than just to those in a particular culture or time.

Let us consider what this passage is saying. The word for 'silent' does not mean 'quiet'. Thus, it is not saying that women should have a quiet (meek) spirit. The word translated 'silent' means no word can be spoken! It is saying *women must be* (completely) *silent in church*. This does not just disqualify them from teaching but from testifying, praying, prophesying, and moving in the gifts of the Spirit-the latter being the context of these verses (1 Corinthians 12:1).

The first problem with this passage is that it contradicts Paul's other teaching in this book. For he says women may pray and prophesy in church (1 Corinthians 11:3-5). In 1 Corinthians 12, especially in verses 13-27, he teaches that all members of the church (men and women), are members of the body and thus have a function in the body working in coordination with each other, and so we can all be used in the gifts and ministries of the Spirit.

So, he says 'if *all* (men and women) prophesy' (1 Corinthians 14:24)

'When you come together, *everyone* (men and women) of you has a psalm, has a doctrine, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation' (verse 26).

'You may *all* prophesy one by one' (verse 31).

So, why would he say three verses later that all women must be silent in church? Is he being double-minded? So, the first problem is that in the middle of encouraging everyone to move out in ministry, he is telling all women to be silent!

This also contradicts the spirit of the New Testament with Jesus treating women with honour, with the churches set free from all Jewish traditions (Acts 15), with full equality in the church (Galatians 3:28) and with the Spirit poured upon all flesh (male and female) to give power for ministry (Acts 1:8, 2:4,16-18)

A second problem is the discouragement upon women from even learning:

'And *if they want to learn.*' The tone of this is condescending to women, that not only should they not speak, but it is also optional for them to learn the Word (it is even mildly frowned upon as if it were not really their place.) This is clearly in contradiction to the New Testament teaching for women and contrasts with what Paul said in 1 Timothy 2:11: 'Let a woman learn.' Here he encourages women to study the Word. Here he speaks against those who would discourage them.

Women in Ministry: 1 Corinthians 14:34–35

34 αἱ γυναῖκες ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σιγάτωσαν· οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτρέπεται αὐταῖς λαλεῖν, ἀλλὰ ὑποτασσέσθωσαν, καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει.

35 εἰδέτι μαθεῖν θέλουσιν, ἐνοῖκω τοῦ σιδίου τοῦ ἀνδρός ἐπερωτάτωσαν· αἰσχρὸν γάρ ἐστιν γυναικὶ λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ.

34 Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says. **35** If they have any questions, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings (NLT).

First Corinthians 14:34–35 is one of the two texts from the New Testament often used as a major argument against preaching, teaching, and leadership ministries for women in the church. An adequate, biblical explanation must be offered for this apparent prohibition against women in ministry.

It should be recalled that Paul has already indicated in this letter—1 Corinthians—that women did participate in prayer and prophecy with the authority in the church (1 Corinthians 11:5, 10; 14:3–5). This fact alone shows that 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 cannot be a general, absolute, and timeless prohibition on women speaking in church. It was common at one time to “dismiss” the evidence of 1 Corinthians 11:5, 10 according to Metzger¹ and a few would still argue this position. Baker² suggested that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 did not refer to a meeting

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart, Germany: Freiburger Graphische, 2005).

² Kenneth Baker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

of the church but only to a private non-church gathering. The whole context of 1 Corinthians 11:2–14:40, the argument of 1 Corinthians 11:16, and the parallel between 1 Corinthians 11:2 and 11:17 make such an idea most untenable. Some have even suggested that 1 Corinthians 11:5 was only hypothetical, but such an approach is clearly an argument of desperation.

The silence enjoined in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 must be a specific, limited silence. Numerous suggestions have been offered, but only the major alternatives can be reviewed here (some scholars, with slight evidence, have also suggested either that 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 was not written by Paul but was inserted by a copyist or that it is a question from Paul's opponents in Corinth which Paul denounces in 1 Corinthians 14:36. Protus (1995) opined that the speaking prohibited here is mere babbling. There is, however, nothing specific in the context to support this meaning of "speak," and such nonsense would certainly have been prohibited to all persons in the worship Paul described. Another view suggests that speaking prohibited is speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) since that is frequently mentioned in the preceding context (1 Corinthians 14). However, *glossolalia* is always referred to as "tongues" or "speaking in tongues" and never simply as speaking (Metzger, 2005).

The most popular view today among those who oppose women speaking with authority in the church is to identify the speaking prohibited with the judgment of the prophets mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:29. Greenbury³ argued that women may prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:5) but may not judge or evaluate prophecy. The evaluation of prophecy is seen as the truly authoritative level of speech in the church from which women are to be excluded. This view has two major difficulties. First, the word "speak" in 1 Corinthians 14:34 has no implication within the word itself or in its immediate context (14:34–35). Akintunde⁴ supported identifying it with the concept of prophetic evaluation. Second, the idea of two levels of speech in the church — prophecy and the judgment of prophecy — with the understanding that one is higher than the other and is for men only has no clear or implied support elsewhere in Pauline writings. Paul's own definition and defense of prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:1–25) implies directly that prophecy itself is an authoritative speech of the highest level in the church.⁵

The view that seems best is to understand the speaking prohibited here to women to refer only to disruptive questions that wives (usually uneducated in the culture of Paul's time) were asking their husbands. This corresponds precisely with the resolution Paul offers (1 Corinthians 14:35): "if they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home... (NIV)." Such disruptive questioning was also considered a disgrace in Paul's day in which it was widely believed that it was morally indiscreet for any wife to say anything on any subject in public. This view of disruptive questioning also fits well the specific context (1 Corinthians 14:26–40) in which Paul is concerned about appropriateness and order, which permits genuine edification (note that 1 Corinthians 14:26 expects everyone to participate). Thus, there are three injunctions to silence (1 Corinthians 14:2, 30, 34), although many Bible translations use "silent" only in 1 Corinthians 14:34.

³ James Greenbury, "1 Corinthians 14:34–35: Evaluation of Prophecy Revisited," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 4 (December 2008): 721–31. <https://www.bible-researcher.com/greenbury.pdf>

⁴ D. O. Akintunde, *The Lukean Narratives about Women* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Nigeria Publication Bureau, 2005).

⁵ Albert Hogeterp, "Prophecy and the Prophetic as Aspects of Paul's Theology," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4, no. 2 (2018): 169–196. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a09>

Black Feminism or Black Womanism

The limitation of mainstream feminism led to the birth of black feminism. The black womanism argued that feminism's central focus should be human emancipation and the "construction of more egalitarian societies – one in which both women and men are freed, from sexist and other forms of oppression."⁶ The black feminists insist that racial and sexual oppression were the fundamental issues in black women's oppression. Walker⁷ (one of the leading black feminists and the proponents of womanism) insisted that the black woman must begin to speak up for herself. Christian,⁸ advocating Walker's position, observed that "if black women do not tell the world who they are other people will say it badly for them when we speak ... we validate our experiences. I am a black woman, which means that when I read, I have a particular stance."

The development of the culture of black women's assertiveness encouraged them to speak out on issues that endangered their existence. Black feminist writers reflect this consciousness in literary works that emerged to correct early negative portrayals of black people. The slave culture of silence and suffering, without demand for redress, finally gave way to that of a conscious demand for human rights and better treatment. The black woman discovered that it was important for her to speak out if her desire for freedom and empowerment was to be realized. Brown⁹ captured this transformation when she quoted Clark,¹⁰

I used to feel that women couldn't speak up, because when district meetings were being held at my home, I didn't feel as if I could tell them what I had in mind but later, I found out that women had a lot to say, and what they had to say was worthwhile. So, we started talking and have been talking quite a lot since that time.

The discourse of Black Feminism is dominated by the demand for change in the socio-political and economic order of things. This took a new turn when Walker¹¹ drew attention to the peculiar realities of the black woman in America. The necessity of defining the black woman's reality led to the birth of the movement which Walker called "womanism."

As an ideology, womanism is the black woman's intellectual framework that articulates her standpoint on self, community, and society. It is committed to forging positive self-definition, self-relevance, self-reliance self-discovery, and self-independence that can fight racial and sexist oppression. Stewart, one of the early black feminists, urged black women to be "bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted" if they were to have any rich heritage of progress, independence, and positive self-affirmation.¹²

⁶ Y.O. Akorede, *Feminism and the Intra-Gender Conflict Theory* (Cotonou, Benin: Lyette Book, 2011), 43.

⁷ Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovick, 1970).

⁸ Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writer* (New York: Pergamon, 1989), 12.

⁹ Cynthia S. Brown, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Navarro, TX: Wild Tree, 1986).

¹⁰ Alice S. Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Kelly, 1968), 82.

¹¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1984).

¹² Richardson, as quoted by Y. O. Akorede, *Feminism and the Intra-Gender Conflict Theory*, (Cotonou: Lyette Book, 2011).

Walker¹³ described womanism as a universalist ideology that is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.” Womanism emphasizes the centrality of the family, motherhood, and mutual coexistence. Its central concern, however, is like that of other women-centered movements. Nevertheless, it equally agitates for the actualization of the black woman’s desire for political, social, and economic relevance in the United States of America.

Historical and Biblical Perspectives

In the Bible, it was recorded that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NIV). However, in Genesis chapter 2, there is a specific purpose for creating a woman – to be “a helper suitable for [man]” (verse 18, NIV). Since then, women have been a helper, and not a servant or subordinate, of man. Both are equal before God. Despite their obvious physical differences, there are no spiritual differences between them. However, as time went on, as it will be proved through ancient history below, women were relegated to an inferior position, even to the point of viewing them as ordinary properties of men.

Nevertheless, God made use of many women in the history of Israel to demonstrate that they are also important. Such women were: (1) Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20-21) who was a prophetess, musician, and a national leader (Numbers 12), and her leadership skills were a special gift to the people of Israel (Micah 6:4); (2) Deborah was a prophetess of God and the only female judge of Israel (Judges 4:1-5) who led the army of Israel to war with a resounding victory; (3) Huldah was a great prophetess who gave God’s word to Josiah at the beginning of a religious revival in Israel (2 Chronicles 34:22-28), and who God chose to speak when prophets like Jeremiah and Zephaniah were also doing God’s work; (4) Esther, a Hebrew woman who married the Persian king, Xerxes, saved her people from a terrible conspiracy (see the Book of Esther); (5) Mary, the mother of Jesus was the woman in the Bible who fulfils God’s ancient promise to Eve that she would one day be the great victor over Satan, the great enemy of humankind.

All the above women, except Mary, were Old Testament women. In the New Testament, there were also many women who had public ministries for God. This included Philip’s daughters (Acts 21:9), Phoebe (Romans 16:1), Priscilla (Romans 16:3), Junia (Romans 16:7), Tryphena and Tryphosa (Romans 16:12), Persis (Romans 16:12), and Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2). All these women, and many more today, mark the beginning of the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy of a day that women, as well as men, would be the instruments of the Holy Spirit’s work (Joel 2:28-29). According to an online report,

The foregoing overview of women in the Bible has shown the New Testament is replete with affirmations of the personhood of women and of their valuable contributions to the work of the church. Women and men are equally members of the priesthood of believers by faith in Jesus Christ. They are both called to “declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1Peter2:9).¹⁴

The ancient history, especially the Greco-Roman history, reveals how women were relegated to the background. According to an Internet source. The secular Roman/Grecian

¹³ Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*.

¹⁴ “Women in The Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice Introduction and Part I ‘Women_in_Church3’”, accessed May 1, 2008.
http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Women_in_Church3.pdf.

culture of the day was strongly influenced by the pagan philosophers, primarily Socrates (470-399 B.C.), Plato (427-347 B.C.), and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). Socrates taught, for example, that in all regard women were "the weaker sex," and that being a woman was a punishment, since women were halfway between being animal and human. In the Greek culture of that time, the men loved to get together and discuss philosophy, or go to sporting events, while the women stayed behind, never being allowed to venture out of the house extremely far. Social, cultural, and educational opportunities for women were limited.

Aristotle furthered the notion of sexual inequality with comments such as these: "The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying." "The difference between husband and wife is like that of a man's soul and his body, as the soul is meant to command the arms and legs." Later, the philosopher Zeno (335-265 B.C.) objected to how men used women so freely for recreational purposes. He was not concerned with the plight of women, but rather that men were in this way distracted from the more pure and preferred pursuit of philosophy! Zeno's followers became known as the Stoics, from the stoa pokily (or painted colonnade) in the marketplace in Athens, where Zeno chose to teach. The Stoics became champions of celibacy and restraint. Women were considered a distraction and a temptation to men.¹⁵

Christianity was born and bred in this culture of discrimination against women. The culture influenced the thoughts of many church fathers and theologians that made many people believe not only this discrimination but also the literal translation of some parts of the Bible.

In the early twentieth century, the role of women in the society changed dramatically because of the effects of the two World Wars. When men went to these wars, women took the positions of men in every facet of life. So, when the men came back, it was difficult for them to push the women back to their traditional place. Women also discovered themselves as people that can do what only men as been doing before.

The Historical Implication

The implication of these historical and biblical perspectives is that men have tried, and are still trying, to relegate women to the background. One such trial is the literal interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:33-36. Nevertheless, many women have discovered their original God-given abilities, and they are exercising these abilities today.

The controversial passage (1 Corinthians 14:33-36) cannot be removed from the Bible. It must be interpreted and applied appropriately. The problem has to do with the understanding of what Paul meant to some people. What does "not to speak" entail? Does it mean that women are to remain silent, not singing, not allowed to cough, or comfort or discipline their children? Does it mean during only "formal church services" but not during Bible studies and any other forums of the church? Why should women be subjected to silence? How do women vocalizing in the church usurp authority?

Having referred to 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, a Bible commentator is of the opinion that, "the subject of this section is propriety in public worship, not male-female relations in general. Paul was concerned, however, that the proper relationship between husbands and wives be reflected in public worship ... he desires that all be done to the glory of God (10:31)." [OBJ]

¹⁵ "Should A Woman Be Allowed to Speak or Participate in Services - Part 1" (accessed May 1, 2008). <http://www.biblestudy.org/basicart/should-women-speak-or-participate-in-church-services-1.html>

Taking this into consideration, there are many positions among Bible scholars. Amongst these opinions are:

- i. God has ordained an order that is a basis for administration and authority, and therefore, women must be in submission to their husbands both at home and in the church regardless of their culture.
- ii. Since it was the social order that it was disgraceful for women to speak in the public, Paul's concern is that the church would be strengthened if women respect that order; and
- iii. The point of discussion was disruption of worship by women who became involved in noisy discussions pertaining to speaking in tongue and prophecy.

In line with point (iii) above, it is believed that it was not an order to all the men not to allow any woman to speak in church, but specifically to husbands to guide and teach their own wives so that they cause confusion and disturbance in a meeting. However, what about the unmarried women? Who will guide and teach them? This raises another controversy that the word translated "women" in the passage may not refer to women in general, but to wives only. Interestingly, the same Greek word was translated "woman" and "wife" in most English translations. It was, therefore, the opinion of Lowery¹⁶ that,

Paul...wanted silence on the parts of married women whose husbands were present in the assembly, but he permitted the participation of other women when properly adorned (1 Cor. 11:2-16). Such silence would express their subordinate (not inferior) relationship to their husbands. This contrasts with a disturbance caused by their talking to their husbands during the service.

In his reactions to this controversy, Warfield¹⁷ concluded

(1) That the prohibition of speaking in the church to women is precise, absolute, and all-inclusive. They are to keep silent in the churches — and that means in all the public meetings for worship; they are not even to ask questions; (2) that this prohibition is given especial point precisely for the two matters of teaching and ruling covering specifically the functions of preaching and ruling elders; (3) that the grounds on which the prohibition is put are universal and turn on the difference in sex, and particularly on the relative places given to the sexes in creation and in the fundamental history of the race (the fall).

Another argument is that Paul could not be contradicting himself with this passage in relation to what he has said in other places (see 1 Corinthians 11:4-5; 14:26; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11; Titus 2:3-5), and with his action of allowing women to be his fellow workers in spreading the gospel (compare Acts 18:3; Romans 16:1-16; Philippians 4:2-3). Paul gave some qualifications for electing deaconesses in 1 Timothy 3:11. What would have been their roles if they were not to speak in the church?

Conclusion

Women are created in the image of God as helpmate for men. They have their roles to play in the world and in the propagation of the gospel of Christ. Regardless of attempts by

¹⁶ David K. Lowery, *1 Corinthians: In the Bible Knowledge Commentary*, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983).

¹⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Paul on Women Speaking in Church* (2008), <http://www.bible-researcher.com/warfield1.html>

men to relegate them to the background, women are equal spiritually to men, and they can perform any role in the church and in any other place. Therefore, 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 should not be interpreted literally. It must be interpreted within its context. However, women should remember that they are to be in submission to their husbands regardless of the position they find themselves in.

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