

8. The final section of the chapter comprises the second part of Paul's summary instruction regarding spiritual gifts (14:34-40). The first part of Paul's summary emphasized order and propriety as critically important to the Church's well-being and edification, and therefore fundamental to the way the Spirit's gifts must be viewed and utilized. In terms of utterance gifts such as tongues and prophecy, edification depends upon intelligibility, but intelligibility depends upon more than merely understandable words. Where utterances are made in the context of chaos, confusion or other distractions, those words will not communicate as they ought, in spite of their being uttered in the language of the hearers (whether directly or by means of an interpreter).

These considerations and their contribution to Paul's overall argument must be kept in mind when approaching this closing section. Many times readers come to this passage and treat it in isolation, as if Paul were changing the subject and turning to a new topic of women speaking in the assembly (This apparent discontinuity has led some to conclude that this passage is a later insertion.) But approaching his instruction in this way insures that his meaning will be confused and obscured, if not lost altogether. For, while Paul was indeed writing concerning women in the church assembly, *he was doing so in terms of his contextual argument that order and propriety in the assembly are essential to the Spirit's gifts accomplishing their intended purpose of edification.* One must read Paul's instruction in these verses through this lens if he is to grasp his meaning.

- a. This is arguably the most difficult passage in the entire context, and the first challenge is determining whether v. 33b concludes the preceding section or introduces the present one. (The original form of the Greek text doesn't include punctuation which would answer the question.) Commentators are divided on this issue, but, in the end, Paul's meaning isn't greatly affected either way.
- If v. 33b closes out vv. 26-33, then Paul was merely emphasizing to the Corinthians that orderliness in the assembly isn't uniquely their obligation, but is God's standard in all the churches. Perhaps the strongest argument against treating v. 33b this way is that it seems unnecessary. It goes without saying that, if God is a God of peace and not confusion, He is that way everywhere and at all times. Thus Paul hardly needed to tell the Corinthians that God is the same in all the churches.
 - If, on the other hand, v. 33b introduces vv. 34-40, Paul was indicating that his forthcoming instruction concerning women is what he prescribes in all the churches. He didn't want the Corinthians to conclude that he was singling them out because of considerations or issues unique to them. This view, too, has its weaknesses, among them the fact that it leaves Paul guilty of constructing a somewhat awkward, perhaps redundant statement. Literally, his statement would read: "*As in all the churches of the saints, let the women be silent in the churches.*" But despite the awkwardness of the wording, this is probably the way Paul intended the passage to be read. He had the same prescription for all the churches, and that prescription was that women are to remain silent in the church assembly.

- b. The greater difficulty is the apparent contradiction between Paul's prohibition in this passage and his previous instruction. Earlier he addressed the matter of women prophesying and praying in the assembly and he voiced no objection to their *speaking*, only to the *manner* in which they did so (ref. 11:1-16). Paul didn't forbid women to speak in the Church, but he insisted that they present and conduct themselves in a manner which would not undermine their testimony to Christ and His gospel and stumble other saints (or the watching world). And in his instruction on spiritual gifts, Paul made no distinction between men and women in terms of the charismata and their ministration. In particular, he nowhere states – or even suggests – that only men have utterance gifts (ref. Acts 21:7ff). And if women are also endowed with gifts such as tongues and prophecy, it follows that they are obligated to employ those gifts as the Spirit intends, namely *in the Church* for the sake of the body's edification (cf. 12:1-11, 28-30 and 14:26).

To this point Paul has given every indication that women are to be active participants when the saints assemble together. True, there are restrictions placed upon them, but there are restrictions on men as well. *Male or female, all of Christ's saints are obligated to worship Him in Spirit and truth in conformity to Christ's headship of His Church and the law of love.* They must do all things for the sake of the gospel and its fruitfulness in edification – whether in regard to their fellow Christians or the unbelievers observing the Church and its members (cf. 8:1-13, 9:11-12, 19-23, 10:23-33, 14:20-26). Thus far Paul has only restricted women in the Church as required by the obligation of edification; now he seems to be forbidding them from speaking at all.

There are only two ways to conclude (assuming Paul's authorship of 14:34-36, which some commentators deny): Either Paul was inconsistent – if not self-contradicting – in his position and instruction, or he wasn't. Some conclude he was indeed inconsistent, but this “resolution” actually resolves nothing, for it leaves the matter of women's participation in the assembly up in the air. Which of Paul's positions should we adopt, and how do we know? And if Paul held inconsistent views, doesn't his inconsistency at least suggest that he hadn't himself thought through the issues carefully and thoroughly? And that being the case, what confidence should we have in anything he has to say about this topic? But if in fact Paul's instruction *is* consistent – and the contention here is that it is, we have the obligation to resolve the apparent inconsistency in a manner that does justice to all he has to say about the role of women in the Church. That requires careful interaction with this epistle, but also with Paul's teaching elsewhere.

- c. Beginning then, with this passage, it needs to be interpreted in the light of the context as well as Paul's previous instruction in chapter 11. *Four considerations are in the forefront in that regard.* The **first** is the arena of Paul's injunction. That is, was he prohibiting women from speaking in the formal assembly or in any setting where other Christians are present? Context must answer this question, since in 14:34 Paul says that women are to remain silent *in the churches*, while in the next verse he says that it's shameful for women to speak *in an assembly*.

Considered alone, these two statements make it difficult to determine Paul's meaning. But his subsequent comment is helpful – not so much for determining the venue he had in mind (i.e., the formal assembly of the church or any gathering of Christians), but his demand that women remain silent. Even if it's assumed that Paul was forbidding women to speak in *any* assembly of believers, his comment suggests that this prohibition isn't absolute. It appears to be associated, in some sense, with speech motivated by the desire to learn. (What exactly this "learning" is must be determined by the larger context.)

The **second** consideration is that Paul's insistence that women remain silent in the assembly is set within his discussion of spiritual gifts, *and specifically prophecy and tongues* (note vv. 39-40). This is important because these are utterance gifts and Paul's prohibition pertains to *speech*. Treated in context, it seems that Paul was referring to speech somehow related to the exercise of tongues and prophecy. Three options are reasonable: 1) Paul was forbidding women to prophesy and speak in tongues in the assembly; 2) he was forbidding them to participate vocally in the judgment of prophetic utterances; 3) he was forbidding *both*.

The **third** issue is the need to reconcile this passage with 11:1-16. If Paul's prohibition in 14:34-35 is taken *absolutely* (i.e., women may not speak at all in an assembly of believers), the only way to reconcile these two passages is to conclude that the chapter 11 passage isn't talking about the gathered assembly. Women *may* prophesy and pray audibly (in conformity to the definition Paul provides), but only in private settings outside of the assembled church. The most obvious problem with this interpretation is that the passage itself gives no indication of it; rather, it is *assumed* on the basis of a particular reading of 14:34-35. In fact, Paul's only hint – namely, his summary reference *to the churches* in 11:16 – suggests that he was discussing a practice in the assembled body. (Note that Paul's transitional exhortation in 14:26 makes the same suggestion.)

Assuming, then, the most natural reading of 11:1-16 (and taking into account the corresponding passage of 1 Timothy 2:11-12, which will be examined shortly), it follows that Paul's prohibition in 14:34-35 *cannot* be taken as absolute. And laid alongside the preceding considerations, it seems apparent that Paul was referring to speech associated with the gifts of tongues and prophecy and which is motivated by the speaker's desire to learn.

A **fourth** consideration is the relationship between Paul's directive and the male/female order of creation. Paul didn't raise this topic in the present context, but he did earlier in the epistle (11:6-12) and it clearly framed his thinking respecting the role of women in the Church. This issue of the creation order turns the spotlight on another of Paul's letters in which he addressed the role of women, namely his first epistle to Timothy. In that letter he explicitly referenced the male-female order in creation (and their roles in the fall) as substantiating his position that women are to be in subjection in the Church (ref. 2:9-15).

The matter of male primacy and headship was discussed at length in the treatment of 11:1-16 and that discussion need not be repeated here. But a few summary statements are in order as they provide a foundation for considering Paul's parallel instruction in 1 Timothy 2:9-15.

- First, the creational primacy of man over woman isn't absolute. For though, in the first instance, woman originated in man, the pattern ever since is that man has his origin in woman (11:11-12). There is a fundamental biological and ontological *interdependence* between male and female. God's design for *man* as "image-son" is male and female (Genesis 1:26-27; cf. 2:18-20); man is incomplete without woman and woman is incomplete without man. *Humanness – both as created and as consummated in Christ – is a matter of male and female* (1 Peter 3:7).
- This means that male/female distinctions are overarched by a fundamental ontological *sameness* and *equality*. The implication is that functional roles reflect and serve the ultimacy of this sameness, and that includes the arenas in which women are to be in subjection (whether to their husbands or to male headship in the Church.) In a word, headship and subjection – understood and exercised as God designed them – express the fundamental existential structure of *unity in diversity*. This existential form defines the entire created order precisely because it defines God Himself, and God's design was that His creation would reflect *Him* and so attest His nature and glory (cf. Psalm 19:1-3, 104:1-31; Isaiah 6:1-3; cf. also Revelation 21-22 in which the creation is depicted as having realized its purpose to consummately glorify God by becoming His everlasting sanctuary.)
- Female subjection (in whatever arena) thus expresses the fundamental existential truth of unity in diversity. As woman is subject to man, so is the Son subject to the Father (11:1-3). This subjection isn't absolute (as in natural human hierarchical structures) because it presupposes and serves an essential *unity*. All subjection – within the created order and within the Godhead – manifests the intrinsic interdependence by which distinctions are related to one another. No distinction is absolute or autonomous; all are mutually interdependent such that together, related properly, they constitute the order and fullness – the *shalom* – for which all things were created – the inter-relational harmony that defines the triune God.

Paul understood these things because he understood the Scriptures with the mind of Christ. So he had them in mind when he drew upon creational features in his instruction respecting female subjection. He didn't use the creational order as a proof-text to justify a patriarchal commitment to male superiority; he referenced it to show how God designed distinctions into His creation and how they are to function practically so as to attest, uphold and exalt the truth. The subjection he called for derives from the very nature of God's creation, and its purpose (as all things for Paul) is to adorn and serve the gospel of new creation in Christ (9:23).

Paul's overarching concern in his instruction to the churches was that they testify truthfully to Christ and His gospel. By doing so, the saints are built up in Him and unbelievers are granted an authentic witness by which they can be saved. *This authentic testimony exists where a community of believers manifests the truth that Christ's Church is a unity-in-diversity organism bound together and operating in mutual love* (John 17:20-23).

This was Paul's burden for the Corinthians and it is the lens through which his instruction to Timothy needs to be viewed. He told Timothy to instruct the women in the Ephesian church to adorn themselves in a manner which adorns the gospel (1 Timothy 2:9-10; cf. Titus 2:1-10). His concern wasn't with forms and manner of dress as such, but with how one's appearance "speaks"; stated in terms of the present context, Paul was concerned that a woman's appearance intelligibly communicate truth respecting Christ and His gospel and not obscure it or lie against it. Even in matters as seemingly insignificant as dress and adornment, Christians are obligated to do all things for the sake of the gospel.

This is the same perspective Paul brought to his instruction regarding female authority in the Church. *The issue for Paul wasn't patriarchy or the preservation of ubiquitous human sensibilities or cultural traditions, but the truth of the gospel and its fruitfulness in the Church and in the Church's witness to the world.* Here he drew upon the same creation order (and, by implication, God's intent in it) to frame his insistence that women are to "quietly receive instruction in all submissiveness" (1 Timothy 2:11). Accordingly, they are not to "teach or exercise authority over a man." Needless to say, there are a myriad of ways in which this injunction has been interpreted and applied in the churches, but the heart of Paul's meaning is that women are not to act independently as authorities in the Church.

The Greek term rendered *exercise authority* connotes a "self-doer": a person who acts autonomously as his own authority. (Paul noted that this quality had its origin in Eve and her autonomous act. It is the mark of fallen man which most expresses his alienation from God, himself and the truth.) Paul's prohibition, then, pertains to women acting as independent authorities in the Church. Here that authority is manifested in women assuming positions of teaching authority over men (whether actually or effectively). Paul notably didn't specify whether this obligation of submission pertains to women's husbands or church leadership; he didn't need to, because when the principle is understood it becomes clear how it applies to both.

It's important to stress that the usurpation of authority need not be overt or formal (or even conscious). In the situations Paul was confronting, it's doubtful women were striving to become elders or recognized teaching authorities in the Church. The more likely scenario is that they were *effectively* assuming authority for themselves by their *self-will* ("self-doers") in the way they were conducting themselves in the assembly. Paul didn't identify this conduct, but it seems some were distinguishing themselves inappropriately by taking an assertive role in the congregation's life and ministration and its interaction with the Scriptures.

This perfectly accords with Paul's instruction in First Corinthians: Paul was addressing the need for order and harmony in the churches, and this obviously implicates the way the saints – women as well as men – conduct themselves in the body. In this particular context (14:1-40), Paul was applying the criterion of order and propriety to spiritual gifts and the way they're to be employed when the community of believers is gathered together.

- Again, the Spirit gives His gifts for the sake of the Church's edification, and edification depends upon *intelligibility*: The gifts must be employed in such a way that they testify truthfully to the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- In the case of utterance gifts, this means that the *words* must be understood by the hearers, but it also means that the *context* in which the words are uttered must not detract from their intelligibility.
- Disorder, confusion and impropriety render understandable words unintelligible and so prevent them from edifying the hearers. Instead of building up the saints in unity and harmony (and testifying truthfully to unbelievers), such speech leaves them agitated, frustrated and divided.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand the critical importance of the situational context in the proper use of spiritual gifts, and wrapped into that context are the *individual believers* who comprise a given congregation and their role in the gifts' ministrations. Thus Paul prescribed the *who* and the *how* of the use of the charismata and not simply the *when* and *where* (14:26-32). The requirement of order and propriety in the cause of edification pertains to the gifted individuals and not merely the setting in which they find themselves. All things – including the saints themselves – are to be in subjection to the cause of the gospel.

That same concern and orientation lie behind Paul's directive regarding women. As noted above, the context indicates that the silence (submission) he called for in this passage pertains to the use of the gifts in the Church, and specifically the use of tongues and prophecy. And given that he previously spoke of women prophesying in the Church (ref. again 11:4-5, 13, 16), *this silence most likely refers to women participating in judging prophetic utterances* (14:29-34).

- This judging would have taken the form of discussion among the saints with the intent of measuring utterances against the truth of the gospel.
- The judging process insured that prophecies (and prophets) were held accountable, but it also served as a *learning* tool, helping the congregation grow in the knowledge of Christ by nurturing its discernment. (It may be that some of the women at Corinth were justifying their participation by claiming their desire to learn (v. 35). Paul's response was that such learning – learning by actively engaging in the critique of prophetic utterances – needs to take place in the home between a husband and wife.)

Assessing – in a manner which honors Christ and the law of love – the words of those claiming the gift of prophecy demands sober, godly wisdom and prudence which necessarily draws upon the Church’s leadership and teaching authority, and women taking an active role in it cannot help but give the wrong impression. Even if there’s no intent on their part to usurp authority, their participation in this way creates a distraction from the business at hand. (One can imagine the awkward scenario in which a prophet finds his *wife* taking part in judging his utterances before the body; this may well have been in Paul’s mind in v. 35).

- d. However one concludes regarding Paul’s meaning, *he* knew his instruction accorded with the Scriptures and the Lord’s own direction and thus was consistent in all the churches (cf. 7:17, 11:16). And, though his injunction regarding women is in the forefront, Paul was referring to *all* of his instruction to them, even beyond the matter of spiritual gifts. And being fully convinced of the divine authority behind his instruction, Paul could insist that anyone at Corinth who chose to dispute or ignore his words proved he was not being led by the Spirit, however “spiritual” or insightful he might believe himself to be (vv. 37-38).

In Paul’s words, the one who fails to properly recognize his instruction shows, by that failure, that he is unrecognized – disregarded in his claim to spiritual insight and maturity. Thiselton notes the correlation of Paul’s logic here with 3:17-18 (cf. also 8:2) and highlights the fact that it embodies an axiom of “an inbuilt penalty for a claim that is exposed as simply self-defeating.” *“Each respective action brings a self-defeating axiomatic penalty of self-loss. To step beyond the bounds is thereby to show the emptiness or lack of validity of the claim.”*

Beyond that, Paul regarded such a person as rebelling against the Lord. To ignore or oppose Christ’s apostle is to ignore or oppose Christ Himself. Carson observes: *“Here, then, is a foundational test of the Spirit’s presence, of ‘spirituality’ if you like: submission to the apostolic writings, not simply because they are the writings of an apostle, but because they are the Lord’s command, and therefore tied irrevocably to the believer’s confession, ‘Jesus is Lord!’ (12:1-3).”*

- e. Paul concluded his treatment of spiritual gifts with a three-fold summary exhortation (14:39-40). In light of everything he’d put before them, the Corinthians should now discern the primacy of prophecy over tongues in regard to the Church assembly and its edification. Thus they ought to be zealous for prophetic utterances when the saints come together. At the same time, recognizing the primacy of prophecy does not imply the depreciation of the gift of tongues. Paul wanted the Corinthians to view the *charismata* rightly as the Spirit’s endowments given unto His work of building God’s true sanctuary on the foundation of Jesus (3:5-17, 6:14-19). Each gift is therefore equally necessary and valuable, so that zeal for prophecy doesn’t mean despising – let alone forbidding – speaking in tongues. *All* of the Spirit’s gifts are to be valued, but this means employing each of them with the Spirit’s mind according to His will and purpose: in harmonious order which adorns the gospel and builds the house of God.