

## **What does 1 Corinthians 14:26-39 say about maintaining order when the church assembles, especially related to the role or participation of women?**

**By Bob Young**

**Historical context.** A great problem with our study and application of the text before us is our tendency to read the Scriptures through the lens of our own experience in the church of today.

What do we know about the church in Corinth? The church apparently assembled in various house churches, as was common in the churches of the first century. The first letter to Corinth was penned no more than 5 years after the establishment of the church. The content of the first letter shows an immature, often contentious church, with various misunderstandings of basic teachings. There is no mention of elders in 1 Corinthians. Leadership was apparently dependent on the early converts (16:15-18).

**Biblical context.** The context and content of 1 Cor. 12-14 shows that there was a desire for prominence and importance. This is reflected in the fact that many were apparently seeking the gift of speaking in languages. Paul addresses this subject in 1 Cor. 12, 13, and 14:1-25. Our analysis of the last part of Chapter 14 is a study of Paul's conclusion to his teaching about spiritual gifts and the nature of the body of Christ, the church.

The two most visible spiritual gifts were apparently speaking in prophecy (a known language) and speaking in a tongue (unknown language). The first part of Chapter 14 is a comparison of these two gifts – prophecy and tongues or languages. Paul's initial description of these related gifts lists prophecy and the discernment or evaluation (*diakrino*) of spirits, languages (*glossa*) and the translation or interpretation (*hermeneuo*) of languages.

The introductory question of 14:26 is, "What should you do then?" Literally, "What then is it?"

### **The text**

26 When you come together, each one has a psalm of praise, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a language, has a translation (interpretation). Let all things be done for edification.

27 If someone speaks in a language (two or at the most three, and in turn), someone must translate.

28 If there is no translator, let the speaker be silent. Let him speak to himself and to God.

29 Let two or three prophets speak and the rest evaluate.

30 If something is revealed to another who is sitting by, let the first be silent.

31 For you are all able to prophesy one by one so all can learn and be exhorted.

32 For spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets,

33 For God is not of confusion but of peace [as in all the churches of the saints]

34 Let the wives (women) in the churches be silent; for it is not permitted to them to speak, but let them be in submission just as the law says.

35. But if any want to learn, let them ask their own husbands (men) at home, for it is disgraceful for a wife (woman) to speak in the church.

36 Did the word of God come forth from you? Or did it come only to you?

37 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or a spiritual person, let him recognize that what I write to you is the Lord's command.

38 If any ignores this, he is ignored.

39 Thus, brothers, be eager to prophesy, and to speak in languages do not forbid. 40 But let all things be done decently and in order.

### **Explanation and comments**

26 The Corinthian church most likely assembled in small groups in homes. The assemblies were not large gatherings as is common in churches today. Smaller gatherings were likely less formal, less organized, and more susceptible to disorganization and being taken over by a long-winded speaker. Paul says that in any assembly, various Christians bring their own unique perspectives and gifts. The participation of various persons should be done in a way that edifies the entire assembly.

27-28 Those with the gift of languages should not speak unless a translator is available. If there is no translator, they should “be silent,” speaking to self and to God. No more than two or three should speak, and they should speak in turn in an organized way.

29-31 Likewise, only two or three should prophesy and the rest should evaluate. A prophet who is speaking should give way and “be silent” when another who is sitting by receives a revelation. By taking turns, all can learn and be encouraged, which is apparently the purpose of the assembly.

32 The instructions can be followed because prophecy is done “under control,” a principle which by extension Paul applies also to speaking in languages. This is obvious by the instruction to “be silent” when no translator is available.

33 Another evidence that self-control is possible for those participating in the assembly is that God desires peace and not confusion.

33b [As in all of the churches where God’s holy people assembly]. This phrase may be taken with what precedes it or with what follows. The principle of peace rather than confusion serves as a bridge to v. 34.

34 The reference may be to “women” or to “wives.” The reference to their “own husbands” in v. 35 suggests wives. Otherwise, the reference in v. 35 is to their “own men.” Paul’s use of the singular in 1 Tim. 2:11-15 and 1 Cor. 11:1-3 also suggests “wife” rather than a general reference to women. Paul addresses women in the plural in 1 Tim. 2:9-10, 15b.

The word used to describe the silence of the wives or women is parallel to the instruction of silence for those speaking in languages (v. 28) and those prophesying (v. 30). The clear prohibition in 14:34 should be used to interpret 1 Cor. 11 instead of vice versa. The principles of 1 Cor. 11 can be applied to being led in prayer, evaluating prophecies (14:29), and to family gatherings. Remember that the assemblies were likely in homes. Nonetheless, 1 Cor. 11 is usually understood as referring to a public assembly.

In the New Testament church, the women were instructed to participate in singing, so the prohibition of 1 Cor. 14:34 must not be absolute. That is, the text must refer to a specific situation. An absolute prohibition, to maintain total silence, is biblically inconsistent. The silence is with respect to some specific matter.

The “law” refers to the Torah, probably referring to Genesis 2-3 where the relationship between Adam and Eve is described. If the reference to the law is to Genesis 3, this reference also suggests “wife.”

The immediate context is with regard to the evaluation (v. 29), especially in contradicting or detracting from her husband. The wife should not participate in the questioning and evaluation of her husband’s words or teachings. Active participation and questioning during the personal evaluation of others’ prophecies is forbidden because it opposes the leadership of her husband. This understanding of 14:34 is consistent with 1 Tim. 2:11-15 (see my comments on 1 Timothy).

The wife is learn with a quiet spirit, in silence, in submission, without attempting to teach or to correct her husband publicly.

35 The wife should question her own husband (only) at home because it is disgraceful for her to speak in the assembly. But it was not disgraceful her to speak in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

36 This verse concludes vv. 33b-35, perhaps addressed specifically to the situation of the women who were perhaps desiring to take a leading role in the assembly or in the evaluation of the participation of others.

37-39 The command of the Lord refers to Jesus’ teachings. These verses obviously provide a conclusion to vv. 26-39, but also to the entire section in Chapters 12-14.