

1 Corinthians 14:34–40

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

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. 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. What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant. Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order.

It Is Not Permitted Unto Them to Speak

Verse 34 sits in a context full of the word *let* — and this verse has one too: *let your women keep silence in the churches*. One might imagine that because it uses the word *let* rather than *thou shalt*, the instruction is somehow optional. But verse 37 gives the answer to that: the things written here are the commandments of the Lord. The *let* of Christian instruction is addressed to willing hearts — it is not a diminishment of authority but an appeal to the conscience.

The instruction is plain: it is not permitted unto them to speak. They are to be in subjection — and speaking in the assembly would be the direct opposite of that subjection. Some attempt to limit the silence to chattering or asking questions, and to show that the speaking which is not permitted is something different from the silence that is commanded. But the verse is speaking of the same people

doing the same thing. The silence is precisely the absence of that speaking.

A gift does not override this instruction. The tongue-speaker was gifted, yet the Spirit of God regulated the use of that gift — when, how many, under what conditions. Philip's four daughters could prophesy, but not in the assembly. The fact of a gift never overrides the order God has set for its exercise. Chapter 11 speaks of a woman praying or prophesying — but not in the assembly gathering: to set chapter 11 against verse 34 as though they contradict requires no advanced theology, only a refusal of the will to be subject.

The Law — and the Creatorial Order

Verse 34 adds: *as also saith the law*. This is not a reference to the Ten Commandments specifically, but to the tenor of the whole Old Testament. The creatorial order set in place from the beginning — the headship of the man, the subjection of the woman, rooted in the way God constituted things when He brought them into being — that is what is in view. 1 Timothy 2 goes back to the creation of Adam and Eve. 1 Corinthians 11 speaks of what nature teaches — not a statistical survey of hair lengths, but the constituted order as God set it up at creation. These things do not change with culture, century, or social pressure, because they are founded in the creatorial order of God.

Sarah called Abraham her lord — not in the literal words she spoke in the account in Genesis 18, but in her heart, and God the discernor of hearts knew it. The commendation of it in 1 Peter shows that this inward recognition of God's order, even when imperfectly expressed, is honoured by God.

Let Them Ask Their Husbands at Home

The apostle anticipates the objection: if a woman is silent, she cannot ask questions, and therefore she may not learn. The answer provided is not

sentimental: *let them ask their husbands at home*. But this answer does more than solve one woman's question. It supposes an order in the home — a husband who is spiritually present, engaged, capable of being asked. It puts responsibility on the husband to know and to find out. If he does not have the answer, the question should send him into the Word and perhaps to his knees, so that the answer comes from the place where answers are found.

The verse supposes that the order in the home is consistent with and supports the order in the assembly. One could enter a home in Corinth and find a wife asking her husband about what was taken up at the meeting, and find a husband exercising himself over it. That order at home reinforces the testimony of the assembly. Where homes are disordered, the assembly's testimony is affected. The principle behind the qualifications for eldership — a man who does not know how to conduct his own house, how shall he conduct the house of God? — is not only for elders. It teaches every believer something about the connection between home and assembly.

Came the Word of God Out from You?

The two rhetorical questions of verse 36 are sharp: *What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?* The first addresses those who might wish to override the apostle's instruction with their own ideas — as if the word of God originated with them. The second addresses those who might suppose this instruction was local to Corinth, applicable only in that first-century culture. Of course it did not come from them. And of course it did not come to them only. The universal scope of the epistle is established at its opening: addressed to the church of God at Corinth and to all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, theirs and ours. That scope encompasses these verses.

The argument that these instructions were culturally conditioned for first-century Corinth is exactly what the second question forestalls. It came not to them only.

The word of God is the transcript of the will of God, and that will is consistent. God does not have one order in one city and a different order in another. He has no such custom, nor the assemblies of God, as chapter 11 already established.

These Are the Commandments of the Lord

Verse 37 is decisive: *if any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord*. A prophet is one who speaks for God. A spiritual is one who has discernment of God's mind and acts upon it. Whether taking in or giving out, whether discerning or declaring, the test of genuine spirituality is this: does the person bow to what is written here as the commandments of the Lord? To claim the gift while setting aside the regulation of the gift is to fail the test of verse 37. And verse 38 closes the matter: *if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant*. There is nothing more to say to one who will not bow.

Covet to Prophecy — Forbid Not to Speak with Tongues

The closing balance of verse 39 is characteristic of the apostle's handling throughout the chapter. He does not forbid tongues — he regulates them, subordinates them, puts them second. He covets for the assembly the gift that edifies: prophesying. And he does not suppress what God has given, even the lesser gift: forbid not to speak with tongues.

This covet is addressed to the assembly, not to the individual seeking self-promotion. Just as in chapter 12, the desire for the greater gifts is a desire that God would send such gifts among the saints — for the building up of the body, not for personal display. The assembly at Corinth, and every assembly, may lay before the Lord the desire that He would raise up prophetic ministry in its midst. That is a right desire, rightly directed.

Let All Things Be Done Decently and in Order

The closing word of verse 40 — *let all things be done decently and in order* — is one of the most misused verses in this chapter. William Kelly observed that it is cited in Christendom for every kind of order except the one that is actually in the passage. The order the apostle has in mind is the order laid down in verses 26 through 39 — the free operation of the Spirit in the assembly, ministry by gift, with regulation governed by love and a sound mind. When this verse is used instead to justify the imposition of a clerical programme, it is used as a pretext for precisely the opposite of what it says.

Darby renders the word *decently* as *calmly* or *becomingly*. There is an aesthetic element in it — something that is becoming before God, suitable to His presence. The bride arrays herself for her bridegroom. So the assembly of God, gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus, arrays itself in a manner that is becoming before Him — not for its own entertainment, not for the satisfaction of the flesh, but for His pleasure. The three mighty men of David who broke through the Philistines to bring him water from the well at Bethlehem did so not because he commanded it but because they heard of the longing of his heart, and that was enough. So the saints in their assembling, knowing the mind of their Lord as it has been set out in these chapters, act for His pleasure — in order, in decency, in love, and in the power of the Spirit.

— Study ends —