

Women and Speech in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14

Mako A. Nagasawa

Last modified: January 24, 2026

Women Should Pray and Prophecy? (1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16)

^{11:2}Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. ³But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. ⁴Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. ⁵But **every woman** who has her head uncovered **while praying or prophesying** disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. ⁶For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. ⁷For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; ⁹for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. ¹⁰Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹²For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. ¹³Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman **to pray** to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

Women Should Not Say Anything at All? (1 Corinthians 14:20 – 40)

^{14:20}Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature. ²¹In the Law it is written, 'BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,' says the Lord. ²²So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe. ²³Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? ²⁴But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; ²⁵the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you. ²⁶What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. ²⁷If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; ²⁸but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. ²⁹Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. ³⁰But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. ³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; ³²and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; ³³for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. ³⁴**The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.** ³⁵**If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.** ³⁶Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? ³⁷If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. ³⁸But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. ³⁹Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. ⁴⁰But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.

Relevance: 1 Cor.11:2 – 16 is related to 14:34 – 40, both thematically and literarily. Not only that, Paul says, 'When you gather, *each* has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation' (14:26; cf. Colossians 3:16). To understand Paul's overall vision of community, worship, gender, and speech, we must interpret both simultaneously. They seem to say two very different things. How do we reconcile them?

Options:

Women in 14:34 – 40	Women in 11:2 – 16	Comments, pros and cons
Should always be silent	Irrelevant	It's quite a problem to dismiss 11:2 – 16 completely!
Should be silent in mixed gender meetings	Can pray and prophecy in women-only meetings	There is no evidence for gender-specific services, either in 1 Corinthians, the New Testament, or history. In fact, Paul provides reasons for men to listen to women (1 Cor.11:11 – 12), which presumes a mixed gender meeting. Furthermore, he says, 'as the Law also says,' even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues that women cannot speak in the worship assembly. Women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel's mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2). When Paul says, 'as the Law also says,' he might be referring to Roman law. Bruce Winter says, 'It was passed in law during the time of Augustus that women were banned from interceding in public settings or come between two parties, and imperial ban was in place from allowing women from intervening on behalf of their husbands in the context of legal arguments.' (Bruce Winter, <i>Roman Wives, Roman Women</i>, p.93) But if Paul was accepting this Roman law into Corinthian worship practice, which is dubious, why would he promote women praying and prophesying in 11:11 – 12?
Refers to a Jewish synagogue ordinance, which the Christians adopted as the pattern of their services, where men would question, object, and dispute points, but women would remain silent	Can pray and prophesy in meetings	Adam Clarke, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, held this position.¹ While Clarke gives an accurate description of the Jewish synagogue position on gender roles, as several rabbinical opinions of women's speech was very negative, Clarke himself says that this Jewish custom was before the Spirit was given to men and women through Christ: 'This was their condition till the time of the Gospel, when, according to the prediction of Joel, the Spirit of God was to be poured out on the women as well as the men, that they might prophesy, i.e. teach. And that they did prophesy or teach is evident from what the apostle says, chap. xi. 5, where he lays down rules to regulate this part of their conduct while ministering in the church... All that the apostle opposes here is their questioning, finding fault, disputing, etc., in the Christian Church, as the Jewish men were permitted to do in their synagogues; together with the attempts to usurp any authority over the man, by setting up their judgment in opposition to them; for the apostle has in view, especially, acts of disobedience, arrogance, etc., of which no woman would be guilty who was under the influence of the Spirit of God.' Evidence does point to the Christian worship service being patterned after the Jewish synagogue service. But the older structure could not fully contain the newer content. It is not clear to me from 1 Cor. that Paul was addressing a section of the Christian service where people were being oppositional and argumentative with regards to the <i>content</i> of what they were saying. Paul does not refer to disruptiveness in particular, but to speech in general. I believe he was simply addressing the Corinthians' disorderliness and perhaps 'dominating the airtime,' and this is why he limits prophecies to two or three speakers, and tongues to two or three speakers. Clarke, moreover, wants to have it both ways: He says the old synagogue rules don't apply on the basis of the Spirit given to all, including women; thus Spirit-filled prophecy and tongues introduce new elements into the Christian service that were not present in the Jewish synagogue. This is indeed the entire basis for Paul's parameters for those speaking prophecies and tongues in 1 Cor.14. But then Clarke says that the portion of the old synagogue service where men disputed and women remained silent <i>does</i> still apply when it comes to managing the prophecy-speaking and tongues-speaking portion of the Christian service, which is ironically the part of the Christian service that was <i>new and completely different</i> from the Jewish synagogue. On what principle would Paul have brought in old rules that governed a different part of the service to govern the new portion? This gets at Clarke's view of gender roles. Clarke believes that Paul's reference to the Law refers to Genesis 3:16. It is plausible in certain situations that a wife's silence could be an expression of her deference to her husband, but it is not, first of all, clear that the fall's consequence – 'he shall rule over you' – is strictly maintained in Christ between husband and wife. That is the larger theological question. Secondly, in addition, for the consequence of the fall to be expressed in the form of 'a wife must, in disputed matters of prophecy and tongues, be silent in the worship assembly and ask her husband at home,' while she herself <i>could</i> teach, prophecy, and speak in tongues about non-disputed matters (?), is a rather questionable inference and reduction. Are prophecy and tongues to be used to trigger disputes in the congregation? Is that their function? That does not seem to be Paul's presumption in 1 Cor.14. The comparison to the Jewish synagogue again falters on this issue. Thirdly, it is unclear on what biblical basis Jewish synagogues adopted the practice of forbidding women from speaking – and specifically debating – in the synagogue assembly. Synagogues themselves were extra-biblical modes of assembly that the Old Testament never envisioned. And women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel's mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2).

¹ Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, Volume 6, I Corinthians 14:34. See also www.godrules.net/library/clarke/clarke.htm

Women generally should be silent when tongues are being interpreted	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	Richard and Catherine Kroeger argued that Paul was restraining women from mimicking the ecstatic frenzy of pagan cults.² Joseph Dillow suggested Paul was silencing women who spoke in tongues without interpretation.³ But why would his language be so broad? I.e. ‘speak in church’ is very broad, and doesn’t seem to refer to only specific times in the service. Furthermore, he says, ‘as the Law also says,’ even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues that women cannot speak in the worship assembly. Women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel’s mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2).
<i>Wives</i> should be silent when tongues are being interpreted	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	‘Gyne’ can be translated ‘wives’ and ‘women.’ The context must be consulted to determine which meaning is intended. In this case, the context is not determinative. Thus, this might refer to ‘wives.’ However, Paul had, in 11:2 – 16, just said that (presumably) wives ‘with the sign of authority on their head’ could still pray and prophecy, so there is still a basic disagreement between the two passages under this interpretation. This might also refer to a certain time of the service when tongues and prophecy are being uttered in a way that the husband-wife union is confused. But again, why would his language be so broad? I.e. ‘The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak...for it is improper for a woman to speak in church’ is very broad. Why would he make such a sweeping command, as opposed to a narrower one? Furthermore, he says, ‘as the Law also says,’ even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues that women cannot speak in the worship assembly. Women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel’s mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2).
<i>Wives</i> who want to learn further should ask their husbands at home	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	Linda Belleville points out that we must consider educational backgrounds and marrying ages. At that time, most girls stopped their formal education at marrying age (14 in Greek culture; 16 – 18 in Roman). Boys, however, continued their education well into their 20’s and didn’t marry until their 30’s. She insists that reference to husbands means that ‘gyne’ in this context means ‘wives.’ These wives ‘desire to learn’ (14:35) but should reserve their further questions for the home. Otherwise, women were able to use their gifts of prophesy (11:2 – 16). They were able to bring a psalm, teaching, revelation, tongue, interpretation (14:26). They could participate in the discernment of prophecies (14:30).⁴ Eugene Petersen, <i>The Message</i>, translates this passage, ‘Wives must not disrupt worship, talking when they should be listening, asking questions that could be appropriately be asked of their husbands at home.’ But again, why would his language be so broad? I.e. ‘The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak...for it is improper for a woman to speak in church’ is very broad. Why would he make such a sweeping command, as opposed to a narrower one? Furthermore, he says, ‘as the Law also says,’ even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues that women cannot speak in the worship assembly. Women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel’s mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2). Belleville offers that he could have been referring to a Jewish synagogue law/custom, or a Roman law (which she thinks is more likely), but that in the end we have to plead ignorance.
Refers to women or wives who were exercising a teaching role over men	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	Paul establishes too strong of a basis for the silence for that. ‘The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak...for it is improper for a woman to speak in church’ is very broad, and doesn’t seem to refer to the situation of women teaching men since Paul had said in 14:26 that each had a psalm, <i>teaching</i>, revelation, etc. Moreover, Paul says the gift of prophecy is a ‘higher’ or more significant gift than that of teaching (1 Cor.12:28 and 14:1), so it does not make much sense to say that women can prophecy but not teach. It is not always possible to draw a strong demarcation between those gifts, either. Furthermore, he says, ‘as the Law also says,’ even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues this.

² Richard and Catherine Kroeger, ‘Pandemonium and Silence at Corinth,’ edited by Roberta Hestenes and Louis Curley, *Women and the Ministries of Christ* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979), p.49 – 55; and Kroeger, ‘Strange Tongues or Plain Talk,’ *Daughters of Sarah* 12 (1986), p.10 – 13

³ Joseph Dillow, *Speaking in Tongues: Seven Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), p.170

⁴ Linda Belleville, ‘Women in Ministry,’ edited by James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg, *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p.111 – 120

Paul is quoting sarcastically from the Corinthians, and reversing their verdict silencing women	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	This fits with a pattern Paul employs in 1 Corinthians, where he quotes from the Corinthians but reverses or qualifies the quote: • ‘You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings’ without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. (1 Cor.4:8) • ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are profitable. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be mastered by anything. ‘Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food,’ but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. (1 Cor.6:12 – 13) • Now concerning the things about which you wrote, ‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman.’ (1 Cor.7:1) • We know that ‘we all have knowledge.’ Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. (1 Cor.8:1) This also connects with Paul’s vision of Christ reversing Greek ‘wisdom’ throughout the letter (1 Cor.1:18 – 25; 3:18 – 20). Greek culture did put women into the category of property, without many rights, especially if she were childless. I believe Paul was critiquing this Corinthian view.⁵ The pronouns in 14:36 – 39 could be read in the masculine, rebuking the <i>men</i>: ‘Was it from you [<i>brothers</i>] that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? If anyone thinks <i>he</i> is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.’ This concurs with Jesus welcoming women into his circle of disciples (e.g. Lk.8:1 – 4; 10:38 – 42) and women being the first witnesses to his conception and resurrection. Also, there is a virtual identity between Paul’s earlier concluding statement, ‘we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God’ (1 Cor.11:16), and this one, ‘let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment’ (1 Cor.14:37). Apparently, Jesus encouraged his women disciples to pray and prophecy publicly, and this was handed down to ‘the churches of God’ as ‘the Lord’s commandment.’ This also agrees with the sense that there is no reference in the Law (OT) to women being silent in the assembly of Israel. In fact, it contradicts the fact that women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel’s mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2). It concurs with women leaders in the early NT church: Priscilla (Acts 18:18 – 26, Rom.16:3), Lydia, Chloe and Nympha (Acts 16:13 – 15, 40; 1 Cor.1:11, Col.4:15), Phoebe (Rom.16:1), Junia (Rom.16:7), Philip’s daughters and other prophetesses (Acts 21:9), Tryphena, Tryphosa, Euodia, Syntyche (Rom.16:12; Phil.4:2). Finally, this coincides with Paul’s other references to ‘the Law.’ Whenever Paul in 1 Corinthians appeals to the Old Testament, he does so by citing a specific text. He never omits the text. For example: • For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.’ (1:19) • As it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.’ (1:31) • As it is written, ‘Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.’ (2:9) • For it is written, ‘He is the One who catches the wise in their craftiness’; and again, ‘The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.’ (3:19 – 20) • For it is written in the Law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.’ (9:9) • As it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.’ (10:7) • In the Law it is written, ‘By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,’ says the Lord. (14:21) • It is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul.’ (15:45) • Then will come about the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?’ (15:54 – 55) When citing the Law in 14:34 – 35, he does not use his standard formula. Why not? He is more likely rebuking an anti-woman rabbinic saying or Corinthian presumption. Furthermore, Paul normally quotes from the Old Testament in a stylistic manner to make his points, but, as Gordon Fee notes, he never quotes from the Law to draw a direct lesson about Christian ethics and behavior. He insists that we are free from the Mosaic/Sinaitic Law. Moreover, Paul wants his readers in Corinth to ‘learn to not go beyond what is written’ with regards to the Old Testament (4:6). His manner of argumentation using the Old Testament throughout 1 Corinthians strongly suggests that he is intercepting a Corinthian tendency to allegorize the Old Testament to achieve anti-Christian principles. It is possible that Paul is quoting back to the Corinthians their own use of the Roman law about women not intervening in public (Richard Bauman, <i>Women and Politics in Ancient Rome</i> (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), p.8, 10, 15, 105).
---	-----------------------------------	---

⁵ Katharine C. Bushnell, (1889), who quotes 18th century lexicographer Johann Friedrich Schleusner and early 20th century Pauline scholar Sir William Ramsay in support also; Jessie Penn-Lewis, (1919); Helen Barrett Montgomery (1924); J. A. Anderson, (1933); Joyce Harper, (1974); Walter C. Kaiser, (1976); Guy B. Dunning, (1977); N. M. Flanagan and E. Hunter Snyder, (1981); Laurence R. Iannacone (1982); David W. Odell-Scott, (1983, 1987, 1989); Chris U. Manus, (1984); Charles H. Talbert, (1984, 1987); Gilbert Bilezikian, (1985); Gordon D. Fee, (1987); Robert W. Allison, (1988); Linda McKinnish Bridges, (1989, 1990). See also the sociological reasoning put forward in support of this position by Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1986), p.108.

This is a later scribal addition and not Paul's original thought.	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	Gordon Fee and Richard B. Hays believe this. It does explain the sudden appearance of this thought in 1 Cor.14 and the apparent change of mind from 1 Cor.11:2 – 16. Some Western Latin manuscripts (from northern Italy and Irish monastics, as Carroll Osburne shows) contain v.34 – 35 after v.40, and a few Latin fathers were reading the text that way, which Fee takes as indicative of v.34 – 35 being a scribal gloss, or an explanatory note. However, there are no physical manuscripts that we know of without v.34 – 35 altogether. Still, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. So this position is logically possible, though in my opinion less likely.
---	-----------------------------------	---

Women Praying and Prophesying

What then does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16? Should women wear head coverings in order to speak, pray, prophesy, and teach? Paul is simply saying that when men and women pray and prophesy, they should look like men and women, respectively, with respect to each other in their cultural context. There were those who believed women needed to appear as men in hairstyle and dress, on the Greek conviction that women were defectively made men, a thought which shows up in the Gospel of Thomas verse 114 where that document says that women will become men in the soulful realm after death. But Paul was firmly against that Greek gnostic view because he was a Jewish creational theologian who believed that male and female represented God in some particular way. So women should not appear as if they were men because God's eschatological affirmation of women as women was clear in the Old Testament; Simon Peter in Acts 2 quoted Joel 2 about the Spirit speaking through both men and women, without collapsing women into men, or vice versa. Incidentally, I think this is why women's appearance as women represented the 'authority' (not subjection) given to them (1 Cor.11:10): God gave them as women authority, like a crown, which was typically denied them in their cultures, to deliver His word in prayer and prophetic utterance. Notice that women's hair coverings did not connote 'authority' in pagan Greek culture, whereas taken up into the Christian argument for the equality of the sexes, it does in a general sense. That is, the particular form that women's dress or hairstyle took was not the precise issue, but rather its difference from men's dress and hairstyle. Men and women are to appear with respect to their genders as men and women – and that general difference is quite understandable across all cultures – for it plays a theological role in presenting God's redemption for both men and women equally, His missional-prophetic use of men and women as such in their gendered beings, especially God's granting women authority as women.

Note: When Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:14 uses the Greek word *physin* with respect to how men and women culturally present themselves in hairstyle and dress, he is not making an appeal in that regard to an 'order of creation' as he does in Romans 1:26 – 27. Paul read as well as we do that Adam and Eve were initially naked in the creation order, and certainly without hats and scissors. Nor is he making an appeal to some absolute 'custom' or 'descent' of dress and hairstyles, since fashion has never been a particularly stable facet of human life, with clear lineage and such. He is making a general argument that men and women have dressed differently and accentuated themselves differently, by gender.

Confirmation of Exegesis with Historical Precedent

But is this just clever exegesis without any foundation in actual early Christian practice? Do we have any historical information outside of the New Testament writings which indicates that the early Christians encouraged women to speak in the congregation? We do, and they did. This is helpful in further confirming our exegesis of 1 Corinthians with actual known liturgical practice among the early Christians.

T.F. Torrance wrote an article in 1992 called *The Ministry of Women* in which he highlights an amazing mural drawn in one of the earliest Roman catacombs in the *Capella Greca*, within a century after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the mural, seven elders are seated around a table breaking bread and celebrating communion. This is called 'The Catacomb of Priscilla' because Priscilla is one of the seven elders seated next to the presiding elder, presumably her husband Aquila. The institution of the seven Christian elders is copied from the institution of seven Jewish elders that led smaller Jewish synagogue communities throughout the Jewish Diaspora, including in the city of Rome. This is impressive for various reasons, but it indicates that Priscilla was an elder in the Christian community at Rome, who presided at the Lord's Supper and taught the congregation as an elder.

Another popular document called *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is significant for our purposes here. In this story, Thecla was a Christian woman who was gifted in teaching and purportedly accompanied Paul in some of his travels. It was widely circulated and read in an approved manner in the first few centuries, though Tertullian rejected it on

the grounds that it legitimized a woman preaching and baptizing.⁶ While we can be relatively certain that some of the content of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* has been exaggerated, for our purposes here, what matters is that the early Christians cherished a document that featured a woman teaching prominently. In this story, Paul tells her, ‘Go and teach the word of the Lord,’ so ‘she went to Seleucia and enlightened many in the knowledge of Christ...certain gentlewomen heard of the virgin Thecla and went to her to be instructed in the oracles of God’ (ch.10). That is some of the historical attestation which confirms our exegesis of 1 Corinthians.

Torrance continues, ‘In a mosaic still extant in the Church of Santa Praseda in Rome, built by Pascal I toward the end of the ninth century in honor of four holy women, one of whom was his mother Theodora, we can still read around her head THEODORA EPISCOPA! And so we have papal authority for a woman bishop and an acknowledgement by the pope that he himself was the son of a woman bishop! The word episcopa was evidently used at times to refer to the wife of a bishop, as presbytera was sometimes used (and still is in Greece) to refer to the wife of a presbyter, but that does not seem to have been the case in this instance.’

One must consider 1 Timothy 2 – 3 as well, which I do in a separate essay.⁷ But in this case, it is not that Christians today have taken misogynist texts, overturned their true meanings, and constructed another, more progressive, interpretation in its place. Rather, they have recovered the original meaning of these particular texts, which squares with several other key data points, both in Scripture and in history.

Leading Ladies: Part 1

First Century Problems: Reading 1 Corinthians 14 In Its Actual Context

By Adam Ellis

JUN 16, 2026

On June 10, 2026, messengers at the Southern Baptist Convention’s annual meeting voted by about three to one to advance a constitutional amendment barring churches that affirm, appoint, or endorse women as pastors (their terminology). The language doesn’t stop with the title. It covers the functions of a pastor and the act of preaching. Because it amends the SBC’s constitution, it will need a second vote of affirmation next year for it to take effect.

Now, to be clear, I’m not a Southern Baptist. I grew up in the Churches of Christ, and we certainly have our own long and complicated history with this question. But the SBC’s very public vote on this puts a national spotlight on a tense Biblical issue that’s been debated within Christianity for a very long time. Almost all of it comes down to a handful of verses in the Bible. I want to look at those verses carefully because I think there’s more going on there than most people assume.

God’s Bouncer?

Several years ago, when I was just starting out as a young youth minister at a church in Albany, Georgia, we traveled to Atlanta for the national convention of one of those organizations that trains kids and teenagers to do churchy things well. The boys were trained to lead singing, read scripture, and preach. The girls were trained to lead singing, read Scripture, and speak...to rooms full of other girls. At the convention, they did all of this competitively against students from other congregations. And, yes, it was every bit as weird as it sounds.

My wife, Dana, and I had been working with one of our female elementary school students for months on public Scripture reading. On competition day, I walked over to the assigned ballroom to watch her do what she’s worked so hard on.

An older woman stopped me at the door and told me I couldn’t go in.

⁶ Edgar Johnson Goodspeed, ‘The Acts of Paul and Thecla’, *The Biblical World* 17.3 (March 1901, pp.185-190) p. 185.

⁷ See Mako A. Nagasawa, *The Implications of the Chiastic Structure of 1 Timothy on the Question of Women in Church Leadership*, available here: www.anastasiscenter.org/church-and-womens-leadership

I started to explain that one of the girls inside was one of my students, that I'd helped her prepare, and that I just wanted to watch her read what my wife and I had helped her practice. The woman cut me off and (somewhat condescendingly) explained to me that if I went in and sat down while that elementary school girl read into a microphone from a stage, the little girl would be usurping my authority. That, she explained in a world-weary voice, would be unscriptural.

Sometimes, the perfect response just comes to you. To be honest, I'm still undecided on whether it was brilliant and inspired or just satisfyingly sarcastic and cathartic. But I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't a little proud of it.

"But, by your definition, aren't you usurping my authority right now?"

That honestly didn't go over well. She still didn't "allow" me into the room, and I'm pretty sure that, to this day, she probably still doesn't get why that's funny.

She wasn't a bad person. She was just applying a Biblical text as faithfully as she knew how. The problem was the interpretation she'd been handed.

My Confession

For years, I gave people a "safe" answer to this question, and by "safe," I mean I gave an answer that kind of sounded smart while dodging the question. Although it increasingly left a bad taste in my mouth, I kept giving it anyway.

It was my wife, Dana, who finally made it clear to me that silence isn't a neutral position. Silence always functions as a vote for the status quo. She also showed me several things in scripture that she understood intuitively that had taken me more study than I'd like to admit to even get close to.

While I'm at it, I also owe a debt to John Mark Hicks. His book *Women Serving God* is the most rigorous and honest treatment of these texts I've found. His online writing and the conversations we had while I was working through this material shaped it more than I can adequately say.

So I did the work. I read the texts carefully and studied the scholars on both sides of the issue. As always, I'd never ask you to just take my word for anything. I'm asking you to take the Bible seriously and do the work as well.

Before this series goes any further, I should probably point you to an article I published earlier this year on how I read and interpret the Bible (and why). It's called *The Good Book(s)*, and it lays the foundation for everything I'm doing here. With all of that being said, let's get into it.

Extra-Biblical Evidence

Around 112 CE, a Roman governor called Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan. He was trying to figure out what to do with a religious group in the province of Bithynia that was causing him administrative headaches. In the letter, he mentions that he had tortured two female slaves to get information. Honestly, he was actually kind of a terrible person. But the point is that he called these women *ministrae*, which is the Latin word for ministers, deaconesses, or servants of the church.

Pliny wasn't a Christian. He didn't have a theological stake in any of this. He was simply describing what he observed: women in the early church holding specific roles that were visible enough to attract the attention of the Roman government.

That's the historical and cultural context in which these texts were written. Women were already leading and serving as deacons. But for many of us, that history is difficult to reconcile with specific Biblical texts as we were taught them. We usually read these passages as timeless rules or as a part of a pattern we are supposed to emulate.

Silenced?

The argument usually begins with these instructions to the church at Corinth:

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35, NIV)

That two-sentence passage has become one of the primary justifications for excluding women from leadership in many traditions. But if we are going to take the Bible seriously, we have to look at the text closely.

Context: Seeing The Bigger Picture

First, we need to look at what 1 Corinthians actually is.

Paul didn't write 1 Corinthians as some kind of timeless doctrinal statement. He wrote it as a letter to a particular congregation in a particular city with documented particular problems. How do I know that? Because he actually addressed the letter to them and mentioned specific things they are dealing with throughout the letter. The church at Corinth was, for lack of a better way to say it, a chaotic mess. It's true. Whereas in his letters to other churches, Paul thanks God for their great faith or their generosity, when he writes to the Corinthian church, he says that when he thinks of them, he always thanks God because of how much grace God has given to them (1 Corinthians 1:4). Paul then spends sixteen chapters managing factions, lawsuits, and the misuse & abuse of the Lord's Supper.

Chapter 14 is specifically about maintaining order in worship. It addresses how everyone in the gathering is supposed to speak and interact with one another so the whole assembly can function.

Three chapters earlier, in chapter 11, Paul speaks directly about women praying and prophesying in the assembly. He is concerned with the social signals they send when they do it. The modesty he emphasizes has nothing to do with modern dress codes. It is about status. He asks those with wealth not to walk into a room of equals wearing gold and elaborate hairstyles that broadcast their privilege. He doesn't tell them they cannot speak. He assumes they are speaking. His focus is on how they can do it without shaming the poor. He wants their presence to strengthen the church rather than divide it.

This is the same Paul in the same letter. One text guides how women speak in worship, while the other silences them entirely. Both can't be universal rules at the same time. One of them has to be responding to a specific situation.

It should be noted that some scholars take a different path here. Gordon Fee and Richard Hays have argued that verses 34-35 may not be original to Paul at all. They suggest these lines were a later addition inserted by a scribe. The manuscript evidence for that position is worth taking seriously, even though I'm not fully persuaded by it. But, I really don't think I need to be. Even if Paul wrote every word of it, the letter itself doesn't support a universal prohibition.

There's also another translation problem that's worth noting, and it has to do with a phrase your Bible probably contains in this passage. The phrase is “as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.” Here's the issue. Koine Greek didn't use punctuation the way we do, which means translators have to make a judgment call about where that phrase actually belongs in the text.

The NIV places it with verse 33, so the sentence reads: “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.” Other translations attach it to the opening of verse 34, so it reads: “As in all the congregations of the Lord's people, women should remain silent.” I think you'll agree that the placement makes a pretty big difference in the way you read it. The first reading closes out the thought about orderly worship. The second reading makes the silence command sound like a universal policy for every church everywhere.

There's no way to know for certain which placement is correct. The punctuation simply isn't there to settle it. I lean toward the first placement because it fits the flow of the surrounding argument better, but I want to be honest that it can't be proven. What I will say is that wherever you land on it, I don't think it changes the overall case very much. The other problems with a universal reading of verses 34-35 don't go away either way.

A Word About “Headship”

There’s one more piece of chapter 11 that gets treated like an Ace in the hole. In verse 3, Paul writes that “the head of the woman is man.” For a lot of people, that settles the whole question. The head means the boss. The head means the one giving orders. But that reading leans heavily on an English word doing work the Greek may never have done.

The word Paul uses is *kephalē*. It literally means “a head,” as in the thing sitting on top of your neck. It can carry a sense of authority, but it can just as easily mean “source,” the way we still talk about the head of a river. And, the thing is, Paul tells us which way he’s leaning, because he keeps talking a few verses later.

“Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” (1 Corinthians 11:11-12)

Rather than using *kephalē* to talk about some kind of gender-based chain of command, Paul is using it to talk about origin and mutual dependence. Contextually, that’s the clearest meaning based on Paul’s own words. Woman came from man in the old creation story, and from that time on, every man who has ever lived has come into the world through a woman. Paul runs the dependence in both directions and then hands the whole thing back to God. If he set out to install men as the only leadership of the church because of their gender, this is a strange way to go about it.

Powerful Women In The Bible

So which law is Paul even talking about? There’s a phrase right there in verse 34 that tends to get skipped right over. He says this silence is required ‘as the law says,’ and he never tells you which law he means. Across all of his letters, Paul almost always tells you which text he’s working from. He names the author, or he quotes the passage directly, so you can follow the argument yourself. Within this same chapter, just a few verses before verse 34, he writes, “In the Law it is written,” and immediately quotes from Isaiah. That’s his consistent practice.

But here he does neither. He says, “as the law says,” and just keeps moving with nothing attached to the claim at all. Scholars who have cataloged every citation in Paul’s letters have noted that this is the only place in his entire body of writing where “the law says” appears with no text to back it up. And when you go looking on your own for the law he might mean, you’re going to come up empty. There is simply no passage in the Old Testament that commands women to be silent. That law doesn’t exist.

What the Old Testament actually does say is worth noting, though: Deborah held the office of judge over all of Israel. When the military commander Barak was summoned to lead Israel into battle, he told her he wouldn’t go without her. Miriam’s title in Exodus 15 isn’t “Moses’ sister.” It’s “the prophet.” She led Israel in worship at the Red Sea with that title already attached to her name. When King Josiah found a lost copy of the book of the Law during temple renovations and needed someone to speak for God, he sent a delegation to a woman named Huldah. The prophet Jeremiah was alive and available at the time. The high priest Hilkiah was in the room. Josiah sent his delegation past both of them to find Huldah. She prefaced her response by saying, “This is what the LORD says.” In ancient Israel, to speak those words without a genuine prophetic calling was akin to blasphemy. Huldah spoke to them without hesitation, and the king staked a national covenant renewal on it.

Brothers & Sisters

It helps to back up and notice who Paul is addressing in the rest of chapter 14. If he had wanted to single out the men, Greek gave him a word for exactly that. The word *aner* (plural *andres*) means adult males specifically. But Paul doesn’t reach for that word in chapter 14. He keeps using *adelphoi* instead.

Adelphoi is technically a masculine plural. But any standard Koine Greek lexicon will tell you that this was the conventional form for addressing a mixed group of men and women. BDAG, the authoritative Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, documents it explicitly: the plural *adelphoi* regularly referred to communities of both men and women. Greek defaulted to the masculine plural for any group that included both sexes. The word for male-exclusive was *andres*, and Paul didn’t use it.

The NIV renders adelphoi as “brothers and sisters” throughout Paul’s letters, and that translation isn’t just some modern sensitivity update. It’s what the word actually meant in ordinary Greek usage.

Additionally, Paul doesn’t leave prophecy undefined. Two verses before the silence command appears, he gives the Corinthians a clear definition:

“But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.” (1 Corinthians 14:3)

It’s public speech, addressed to the gathered church, meant to build people up. And in verse 31 Paul extends that invitation to everyone:

“For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.” (1 Corinthians 14:31)

He already established in chapter 11 that women were among the ones praying and prophesying in Corinth, so “all” isn’t rhetorical. It means...all.

That’s what makes the traditional reading of verse 34 so difficult to sustain. Paul had the male-exclusive word available throughout this chapter and this entire letter, and he kept passing it over. Three sentences near the end that supposedly bar every woman from speaking at all would be a truly odd thing for him to write. It would mean Paul spent an entire letter teaching women how to take part in worship and then took it all back in a few lines near the close. That just isn’t a natural reading of what he wrote.

Which Women?

Now, look back over 1 Corinthians 14. Paul uses the Greek word sigato, “be silent,” three times in the chapter. Verse 28 silences tongue-speakers if no interpreter is present. Verse 30 silences a prophet if someone else receives a revelation while they’re still speaking. Both of those are conditional, situational instructions that apply in specific circumstances, not as standing rules for every gathering.

The third silence, verse 34, follows that same structural pattern.

Look at the specific words Paul uses. The Greek word for “women” in verse 34 is gynaikes, which can mean either “women” in a general sense or “wives” in a marital sense. The Greek word for “husbands” in verse 35 is andras, which specifically means husbands. In Ephesians 5, translators render that same word pair as “wives and husbands.” Here, they split the pair, rendering gynaikes as “women” while keeping andras as “husbands.” You can’t apply the pair consistently in one direction without following through in the other.

And we need to look closely at the remedy Paul offers: If they want to inquire about something, he says, let them ask their own husbands at home. That remedy only works for a woman who has a husband. Widows, for example, have no husbands to consult. An unmarried woman is in the same position. If this command applies universally to all females regardless of age or marital status, Paul’s own solution fails the majority of the group he’s supposedly addressing. Are they only silenced if they get married? Are they just out of luck with regard to answers if they don’t get married?

The most internally consistent reading is that Paul is correcting a specific group of wives who were disrupting the assembly by directing questions at their husbands. The text tells us the disruption involves questions, and Paul’s solution points straight at a marital dynamic: save those questions for home. If a group of men had been breaking up the gathering with the same kind of interruptions, Paul would have come down on them just as hard. The problem was never that women were speaking. The problem was that the meeting had descended into chaos, and chaos doesn’t get a gender-specific pass. That’s a targeted instruction for a specific mess in the particular congregation to which the letter is actually addressed, not a sweeping rule for every gathering in every century.

Wrapping It Up (For Now)

Long before anyone framed this as a controversy, women were already at work in the church, and the earliest records treat that as kind of unremarkable. Phoebe was a deacon of the church at Cenchreae. Paul's word for her is diakonos, and it's the exact same word used for the office everywhere else in the New Testament, though many translations quietly swapped it out for "servant" when it refers to her.

Then there's Priscilla. She and her husband, Aquila, helped Paul plant the church in Corinth, which means she's not just some footnote in this conversation. She's part of the founding story. The first time Luke introduces them in Acts 18, he names them in the order the culture expected: Aquila first, then Priscilla. But that's the only time it happens that way. Every mention after that, in Acts and in Paul's own letters, lists her name first. Luke and Paul do this independently and consistently across different books, which means it isn't a coincidence. In the ancient world, placing the wife's name before the husband's was a deliberate signal of prominence. When she and Aquila pulled Apollos aside to correct his theology, her name leads in that account too. Apollos was one of the most gifted teachers in the early church, and the person who straightened out his doctrine was a woman whose name Paul consistently wrote before her husband's, defying cultural norms.

Plus, Paul already told us which law he was referring to. He wrote it in another letter, in a line so clear it doesn't need any additional commentary.

"For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:14)

This article is the first in a series that I'm adapting from a set of sermons I preached on the roles of women in the church. If you want to hear the full original lesson this piece is based on, I've included the video below.

Next: We'll dig into 1 Timothy 2, the other passage everyone quotes.

If this article resonated with you, I write regularly at <http://adamelliswrites.substack.com> . I'd love for you to check it out, subscribe, and join the conversation.