

## Study 22. 1 Cor 14:26-40

Mark Wormell

**Big idea: God values order in church and in marriages.  
We must not use this to control or abuse each other.**

### Introduction

What do you do when God disagrees with you? For example, what do you do when an ethical principle that you hold dear seems to be contradicted by God's word in the Bible?

Try to wrestle with this question. Do people always just say, 'if God says it, it must be right'? Or do we try all sorts of ways to accommodate God's apparent meaning to our views?

'Women should remain silent in the churches.' There have been few more controversial issues in the Church in Sydney (and many other parts of the Western world) in the last 30 years than the role of women in the Church, particularly in leadership and church services. This passage, together with 1 Timothy 2:11-15, and the 'submission' passages of Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Peter 3:1-8 (yes, this is not only an issue for the apostle Paul) have provoked much disagreement and division (and factions!: see 1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

Commentaries bulge when they come to these passages. There is not time here to suggest all the possible 'solutions' or interpretations. Some have suggested this passage is a textual error. They say, based on textual evidence, it does not belong here or in the Bible at all. However, it appears in the earliest texts and cannot be wished away.

Whatever one believes, it cannot have been meant literally. In 11:5 Paul clearly contemplates women praying and prophesying, and there is no suggestion only men should sing the hymns mentioned in 14:26. Presumably female deacons could speak in connection with their distribution of relief to the poor, and women could greet each other and family members.

Issues include:

1. What forms of speech were prohibited, and do we have equivalent forms of speech in the church today?
2. Whether the passage should be limited to particular issues in Corinth, or the culture of the time? For example, few churches insist on the head coverings or hair arrangements mentioned in chapter 11.
3. Whether things that were shameful 2,000 years ago (e.g. women or wives questioning men in public), but are no longer shameful, should shape what we do today?
4. Whether the passage applies to all women, or only married women (the word that is translated 'women' can also mean only wives)?
5. What single women, widows and women married to non-Christians should do?
6. How we should apply it today?

7. Whether the apparent purpose of good order should be the dominating principle, so that we may permit women a wide range of verbal communication in church as long as good order is maintained in church and marriages?

Descriptions of the cultural setting are contested. However, there is little doubt the Greek culture was heavily skewed in favour of men. Only men had many legal rights, or could take roles in public life. Women could go out in public only if accompanied. Normally they could not speak to men other than their husbands or relatives. Wives were usually much younger than their husbands (married at 12-14 yo). They lived under the authority of their father until married, when the authority of the husband would take over. Women did not live alone, and needed the protection of a man both for physical safety and propriety.

There were no church buildings. Small groups of Christians met in their homes. They were small enough in number to know each other. There was no need to manage hundreds of worshippers. Yet, Paul still found it necessary to encourage orderly meetings. They should take turns to speak, and not over-do things. They should avoid things that were culturally shameful.

## Observation and interpretation

1. Read the whole passage. What do you think is the governing idea?

It could be verse 26 'Everything must be done so that the church may be built up', or perhaps it is verse 33, and we should conform ourselves more to the character of God.

2. What parts do you find difficult or not easy to understand or accept?
3. While there is to be order in the Corinthian church meetings, they seem less structured than us. Each week at Barneys the staff, under the control of our senior minister, decide on the order of service, the Bible readings, the sermon topic, the songs, the prayers and the identity of the people who do things 'up front'. Are we departing from 'church' as Paul envisaged it? Is that OK?
4. Paul was writing to a small church, that met in someone's house, not a church of many hundreds of people. Does this make a difference?
5. What do you think 'prophecy' means in this context? Verse 31 seems to suggest they were all capable of prophecy. Are we?

In this context, 'prophecy' probably was a form of highly occasion or situation focussed teaching or encouragement. Some have argued it is like the 'application' focussed modern sermon, although others would context this. Conservative commentator Anthony Thiselton says prophecy, 'combines pastoral insight into the needs of persons, communities, situations with the ability to address these with a God-given utterance or longer discourse (whether unprompted or prepared with judgement, decision and rational reflection) leading to challenge or comfort, judgement or consolation, but ultimately building up the addressees'.

6. What aspects of order does Paul encourage in verses 26-32?
7. How does verse 34 sit with your understanding of the 'equality' between the sexes that is mentioned in Genesis 1:27 and Galatians

- 3:28? Are these relevant to the issue of order Paul is addressing in this passage?
8. How does verse 34 sit with Paul's teaching that women can pray and prophecy (1 Cor 11:5)? What does Paul think women should not speak?
  9. Why do you think Paul thought good order in church was so important?

### **Application / Implications**

10. If Paul's point here about women speaking in church is that they should not question the teaching/prophecy/interpretations of their husbands, or other men, because that could bring disorder in church and/or marriages, then, given the greater equality and communication between the sexes that exists in our culture today, and that many women do not live with a father or husband, what limits (if any) on women speaking do you think Paul would impose on our churches? [Sorry this is such a long question!]
11. One issue the churches in Sydney faces is that women have often not received the same training and practice in preaching that men receive. Do you think more women should be trained as preachers? Would you like to hear more women preachers?
12. Do you think more people should have a say in how our services are structured and run? How, and who should decide?
13. [If you have time] Thinking back to the opening question, 'What do you do when God disagrees with you?', how would you answer that question now?

Perhaps something along the following lines may emerge:

First, great care needs to be taken to understand what the passage says and means in its original context.

Second, the original social context needs to be considered.

Third, thought needs to be given to whether universal truths are being set out. For example, it could be that 'order in church and marriages' is the main point rather than 'women always being silent'.

Fourth, the passage needs to be understood in the context of the whole Bible, particularly the New Testament teaching on the role of women and marriage.

Fifth, care needs to be taken to not impose modern values on universal truths, yet we need to be prepared to apply these universal truths to our churches today, and not blindly hang onto or reproduce past cultures or social norms.

## **Prayer ideas**

- Understanding, peace and good relations.
- Building up.
- For Mark Wormell, as he preaches at Barneys on this subject :)