

CHURCH & WOMEN

LESSON THREE

Ice Breakers –

~ Do you remember when women wore hats to church? Why did they do that? What was the point? When and why did they stop wearing hats to church? What was the main factor?

~ In what ways do women pray differently than men? How does a woman's prayer differ from a man's prayer? How might these differences bless the Church? How might we grow in faith or knowledge by listening to a woman pray? How might we experience God differently?

Introduction –

In the Bible, direct commands are not always binding. Think about the command to greet one another with a holy kiss. This is a direct command of Scripture, right there in black and white. It's repeated over and over again in the New Testament (Romans 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). It's a pattern! It's a direct command, an approved example, and a necessary inference --- all three! But we don't kiss each other.

~ Why don't we greet one another with a holy kiss? How did we decide we don't have to obey this direct and repeated command?

~ How did we decide this was a cultural command for a specific time and place and not an all-time command for all people in all places? How did we reach agreement on that?

Nobody expects anybody at Central to greet them with a holy kiss on Sunday mornings. In fact, we'd be creeped out if they did. We believe and behave opposite of the Bible's command. Instead of requiring that we kiss each other during our worship assemblies, instead of making it an optional preference --- you can do it if you'd like --- we actually forbid it. We have determined that this direct command is a local cultural directive given to a specific people in a specific time and place and does not apply to us in Texas in the 21st century.

Arabs and Southern Europeans and Brazilians greet one another with kisses today, but we don't do that in Amarillo. As Christians in God's Church, we look at the reason behind the command. We see an eternal principle: greet one another, show hospitality; we discern the method of greeting and hospitality depends on local culture and practice. We believe the command to kiss one another is "culturally limited." That is sound biblical scholarship. That's always been our practice.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 –

This is about veils and hair length. It's puzzling and difficult to understand. Our respect for the apostle Paul and for Holy Spirit inspiration drives us to believe this passage was perfectly clear to the Corinthian Christians who heard it.

In Roman culture, single women did not cover their hair. But when a Roman woman married, the marriage ceremony included the veiling of her hair --- a sign that only her husband would be permitted to enjoy the sight of her uncovered head from then on. Jewish traditions were similar.

This passage is not about hats. The purpose of the veil was to cover the married woman's *hair* as a matter of modesty. It's not about submission. Modern hats and other contemporary head coverings today have nothing to do with either modesty or submission. If a married woman were not wearing a veil, she was viewed as immodest and an insult to her husband. She was saying, in essence, I have committed adultery or I am committing adultery or I would like to commit adultery. There are dozens of first century writings that speak of punishing adulterous women by cutting their hair or shaving their heads.

This passage is concerned with Christian wives, not women, keeping societal norms so they don't bring shame on themselves, their husbands, or the church.

It's clear from this passage that women were regularly praying and prophesying during the corporate worship gatherings (11:5). We know they were doing this in the presence of men because they were wearing veils. We know that prophecy is a gift from God that carries a certain amount of divine authority (1 Cor. 12:27-28) and it's intended to equip the saints for ministry and to build up the church (Eph. 4:11-12). Women are doing this in Corinth and Paul commends them for it. Paul does not tell the women to stop praying and prophesying during church. He says, "When the women pray and prophesy, do it this way."

This is Paul's pattern throughout 1 Corinthians. He doesn't tell the Christians to stop speaking in tongues; he says, "When you speak in tongues, do it this way." He doesn't tell the church to stop eating the Lord's Meal; he says, "When you eat and drink together, do it this way." In the same way, he regulates the women praying and prophesying so as not to break any cultural norms and bring reproach on the church.

11:3 - "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God"

In the Greek language, the word for man and the word for husband are the same word. The word for woman and the word for wife are the same word. You only know the definition by looking at the context. The ESV and other translations use "husband" and "wife" in this verse instead of "man" and "woman." Since the subject of this passage is the wearing of veils and only married women were expected to wear veils, this must be about husbands and wives. Plus, there's nothing in the Old Testament or in Jesus' teachings about women as a group submitting to men as a group.

"Head" is more about support, encouragement, nourishment, and sustaining the body than it is about authority. God sustains Christ. Christ nourishes the Church. Husbands support and encourage their wives.

We see similar language in Ephesians 5:21-33. "The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church." "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the Church." Husbands, like Christ, must give themselves up for their wives. A husband loves his wife as his own body; he nourishes, feeds, and cares for his wife. This is not about control, this is about surrender; this is not about authority, it's about service.

The husband and wife relationship is not a worldly hierarchy built on worldly principles of power and control and authority. The head and the body are united and in relationship, so closely connected that neither can go its own separate way. The head is the source of the body's nourishment. Wives grow closer to their husbands, more united, as he nourishes and cherishes her --- just as Jesus nourishes and cherishes the Church so that he and the Church may grow more and more united. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is speaking about husbands and wives. He's pointing to the ideals described in Genesis 2 and Ephesians 5, not the realities in our world history books. He's not prescribing the subjection and one-sided, one-way submission that results from sin.

11:10 – “The wife ought to have [a sign of] authority on her head”

We’ve sometimes interpreted “authority” as the veil itself, like the veil is the symbol of the man’s authority over his wife. But the words “a sign of” are not even in the original Greek text. The KJV actually gives us a more accurate translation: “The woman must have power on her head.” She must have authority over her own head. The woman is exercising authority in this scenario, not the man.

“Another possible reading would translate ‘the woman has to exercise control (exousia) over her head,’ and therefore does not directly refer to the head-covering at all. Because of the creation principles (v.8-9) and because of the angels (v.10), she must behave correctly with regard to her head which, of course, means wearing the covering.”

~Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity, Mark C. Black

11:11 – “In the Lord, however, 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.”

“In the Lord” and “however/nevertheless” suggest a contrast with what goes before. Men and women are equal in God’s eyes. No man is above woman as a class of people. Paul completes his argument by appealing to culture. “Judge for yourselves! Is it proper?” Figure it out yourselves, he says. What’s natural? What seems right? These are plain references to the local culture. This is not how Paul would argue an eternal command from God. Look around; what are people doing? These are cultural expectations for the dress and behavior of Christian wives.

1 Corinthians 11 tells us that women were praying and prophesying in the church’s worship assemblies in the presence of men. And they were commended for it. Paul’s concern in this passage is culturally appropriate behavior while praying and prophesying in church. A veil or head-covering is not a sign of authority. This is mostly, if not all, cultural. This is about unity. This is about not offending the culture in the ways you worship.

But now we come to the main part of today’s lesson. **We want to focus the bulk of our time and attention, even to the neglect of 1 Corinthians 11, on this next critical passage of Scripture.** This is today’s takeaway.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 –

“Women should remain silent in the churches.” As tempting as it is to say, “It says what it means and means what it says,” we don’t believe it. We don’t follow it and we don’t practice it. Women sing out loud in our worship assemblies at Central. Our wives speak and read the Scriptures out loud in unison. Our daughters greet and confess Christ out loud. Our Christian sisters sing prayers, make announcements, baptize people with whom they’ve shared Jesus, and read the Bible out loud during our Sunday morning assemblies. Our own common sense and practices reveal that Paul is not commanding complete silence for females during our worship gatherings. We don’t believe it. Those who insist on a strictly literal interpretation of this sentence must admit their own interpretation is neither strict nor literal.

At Central, we are inconsistent in relation to what women do in our church gatherings according to place and time. Anything goes on Wednesday nights, in Bible classes, in our small groups, at retreats and weddings and funerals --- but it’s much more limited during our 10:15 Sunday morning worship assemblies. Why does the time of day or the place of worship determine what a woman can or cannot do?

The Bible itself also raises some questions. It could appear that 1 Corinthians 14:34 contradicts 1 Corinthians 11 where women were openly praying and prophesying during church. Paul doesn’t condemn it, he regulates it according to local context and custom. If praying and prophesying during church is a sin for a woman, then 1 Corinthians 11 would be like instructing women on what to wear when committing adultery!

Paul’s Reasons –

At Central, we have traditionally encouraged women to speak, comment, interpret, ask, read, teach, and pray downstairs in our Bible classes. But we limit or even prohibit those same activities upstairs in our worship center thirty minutes later! Why is it disgraceful or shameful upstairs at 10:15, but approved and applauded downstairs at 9:45? Paul gives us three reasons for the silence of women in church. But each of those reasons comes with its own set of perplexing questions.

~ **women must be in submission as the Law says (14:34)**

Paul believes a wife asking questions in the assembly is unsubmitive. But what makes it unsubmitive in the assembly but OK at home? What’s magic about the assembly that demands female silence? And where does the Law address any of this? Synagogue rules came after the writing of the Law. There’s nothing in Scripture on female silence in the tabernacle or temple.

~ it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (14:35)

Why? Should women be more submissive at church than they are at work? Or home?
Should they be more submissive in the assembly than they are in the foyer?

~ wives should ask their husbands at home (14:35)

What about unmarried women? What if the husband wasn't at church that morning?
What if the husband is not a Christian? We encourage our Christian sisters to ask
questions of the teachers at Central; are we disobeying the will of God?

We should be honest enough to admit we have never enforced this passage as it is written.
Perhaps it's a real possibility that Paul's command was caused by a temporary cultural
circumstance that no longer exists.

"If she should learn anything..." (v.35)

The word is not "inquire" or "ask." It's "learn." Women were degraded and not very educated
when Paul wrote these words. Very few women could read or write. Paul does not assume
women will choose to learn anything. He says, "If..." Paul's making provision for educating
women was counter-cultural at this time. He's way in front of society here. The Church is out of
step with the culture, but in step with Christ.

Asking questions of a teacher was often confrontational. If unlearned women are doing the
asking, it could really bog the assembly down. Women who wanted to learn needed to be
brought up to speed in another setting. It seems as though Paul's command of "silence" refers
only to the asking of questions during the assembly in the context of this learning and asking.

*"Not only the arm but the voice of a modest woman ought to be kept from the public, and she
should feel shame at being heard, as at being stripped... She should speak either to, or through,
her husband."*

~Plutarch, mid-first century

The risk of being labeled as immoral was very real. Directly addressing a man who is not your
husband in conversation or debate was a violation of modest propriety for a woman. To use
Paul's words, it would be "shameful" or "disgraceful." He says they should ask their own (*idios*)
husbands at home (14:35). Paul's command of "silence" refers to a woman speaking to another
woman's husband. This command is a prohibition founded on the appearance of immorality in a
society where married women were not allowed to speak to other men in public. It's cultural.
That was for them then, not necessarily for us now.

1 Corinthians 14:26-35 -

Now, let's look at this in its biblical context and see if we can't figure it out. Read the entire above passage and notice that Paul directs three groups of people to be quiet or "silent."

Word of the Day: "sigao" (silent)

This word always takes its exact meaning from the specific context. It can refer to anything from "not speak at all" to "be quiet" or "keep a secret." This word is used only eight times in the entire New Testament. It's important to note all eight so we can interpret this correctly.

Transfiguration, Luke 9:36 – When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples **kept this to themselves**, and told no one at that time what they had seen. (*they eventually told*)

Paying taxes to Caesar, Luke 20:26 – They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became **silent**.

At Mary's house, Acts 12:17 – Peter motioned with his hand for them to **be quiet** and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and his brothers about this," he said... (*they were told to be quiet [sigao] while Peter spoke, and then told to talk*)

Jerusalem Council, Acts 15:12-13 – The whole assembly became **silent** as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. (*somebody else had the floor, so they stopped talking*)

Benediction, Romans 16:25 – Now to him who is able to establish you by my Gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the **mystery** hidden for long ages past... (*but now revealed and made known through prophesy!*)

1 Corinthians 14:28 – If there is no interpreter, the speaker should **keep quiet** in the church and speak to himself and God.

1 Corinthians 14:30 – If a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should **stop**.

1 Corinthians 14:34 – Women should **remain silent** in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.

Sigao means take your turn, be polite, be considerate, think of others; the spotlight is not on you, pay attention to the brothers and sisters around you. That's consistent with all three of the uses in 1 Corinthians 14. *Sigao* is a temporary silence, typically the courteous silence of not interrupting while another speaks. In 1 Corinthians 14, *sigao* is used to refer, not to total silence, but to abstaining from rude or inconsiderate speech.

Tongue speakers are not commanded to stop speaking in tongues. They are not instructed to be completely silent in the assemblies for all time. They are told to not speak in tongues unless they had an interpreter. The same thing with prophets. Paul commands them to stop speaking long enough to let someone else speak; take turns. And women: don't speak in a way that's shameful or rude.

For all three groups in all three situations, the universal and eternal command is to use common courtesy during church. It's not "Don't use your gifts during the assembly." It's "Use your gifts in a way that edifies others." This is about practicing mutual submission to one another in the Body of Christ. In a culture or place where a woman may speak in the public presence of men without causing scandal or perceived to be immoral, the command to be silent has no application.

Conclusions –

Three groups are told to be silent: tongue speakers, prophesiers, and women. Same language, same words, same context. This passage is not about women, it's about being polite.

The cultural context underlying Paul's commands are not true for us today in the U.S. Women are highly educated and supremely accomplished. It's common. Our men at Central are teaching and preaching every Sunday to women who are more educated and accomplished than they are. Our Christian sisters are leaders in business, politics, and education. Our culture applauds women and encourages female leadership. It's not scandalous; it's quite the opposite.

Plus, women are asking questions in our Christian gatherings all the time. And we encourage it. Bible classes. Small groups. Prayer requests. Interpreting Scripture. It's not scandalous at all. The command for women to be "silent" was for them back then, not for us right now.

Women are to be in submission to the requirements of decency and orderliness, not to men or their husbands. All of us are to be in submission to one another, to the Body of Christ. All men and women are under those same instructions. Submit yourselves to one another (1 Cor. 16:16). Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21).