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GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Answering Atheists: Can Women Speak in Church? (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

TEACHING SUMMARY

This teaching examines whether Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 forbid all women from speaking in congregational gatherings. It begins with the charge that Paul suppressed women's voices and then tests that reading against other passages. Its central interpretive principle is to compare Scripture with Scripture so that an individual passage is understood in light of the whole.

The teaching points to women serving in ministry and to Paul's explicit reference to women praying and prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11:5. Prophecy is meant to edify and instruct the congregation, so this activity involves speaking. It also notes that the whole gathering contributes hymns, lessons, revelations, tongues, and interpretations. These observations challenge a universal prohibition on women's speech.

The immediate context is orderly worship. Paul also tells tongue-speakers to remain silent when there is no interpreter and tells prophets to yield while another speaks. The teaching reads the instruction to women alongside these temporary, situational calls for silence. It therefore understands the prohibited speech as disruptive speech rather than all speech by women.

The precise local problem is not known. The teaching mentions several scholarly proposals and develops the possibility that wives were publicly questioning or challenging their husbands during the gathering. Paul's instruction to ask at home is taken as a clue. Within the ancient cultural setting, such public challenges could bring shame and disrupt the service, but the proposed reconstruction is kept conditional.

The teaching explains submission in this marital context as voluntary yielding rather than forced inferiority. It places the instruction alongside commands that husbands avoid harshness and love their wives sacrificially. It also acknowledges uncertainty about Paul's reference to the law, offering several possible meanings without claiming to settle the question.

The conclusion distinguishes the uncertain details from the teaching's firm rejection of a universal silence rule. It recognizes that modern cultural expectations differ from those of Corinth. The continuing principle is mutual respect between spouses, avoiding deliberate public embarrassment, addressing suitable matters privately, and avoiding unnecessary obstacles for others while maintaining orderly gatherings.

SUMMARY POINTS

- The teaching interprets 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 by comparing it with other Scripture.
- Women serving in ministry challenge a reading that prohibits all congregational speech.
- Paul refers to women praying and prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11:5.
- The chapter's concern is that worship be conducted decently and in order.
- Tongue-speakers and prophets also receive situational instructions to be silent.
- The teaching understands the restriction as directed at disruptive speech.
- Public questioning by wives is presented as one possible reconstruction of the local problem.
- The teaching describes marital submission as voluntary and pairs it with sacrificial love from husbands.
- The meaning of Paul's appeal to the law remains uncertain in the teaching.
- Mutual respect, appropriate privacy, and orderly worship remain applicable principles.

FILL-IN-THE-BLANK

Basic

1. The passage at the center of this teaching is 1 Corinthians _____.
2. The interpretive rule emphasized is to compare Scripture with _____.
3. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul refers to women praying and _____.
4. If no one can interpret a tongue, the speaker must keep _____.
5. Paul tells the wives to ask their husbands at _____.
6. Paul's goal is that all things be done decently and in _____.

Challenging

1. The woman identified as a deacon in Romans 16:1–2 is _____.
2. The Greek term for submission discussed in the teaching is _____.

3. The teaching explains the wife's submission as _____ yielding rather than something forced by her husband.
4. Colossians 3:19 instructs husbands not to be _____ with their wives.
5. In the proposed reconstruction, wives' public challenges could _____ their husbands in the ancient cultural setting.
6. The teaching says we cannot know for sure what Paul means by his appeal to the _____.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the teaching bring women's ministry roles and 1 Corinthians 11:5 into its interpretation of chapter 14?
2. How do the instructions to tongue-speakers and prophets help explain the kind of silence being discussed?
3. What clue supports the proposed reconstruction involving wives' questions, and what remains uncertain?
4. How does the teaching distinguish voluntary submission from forced submission or harsh treatment?
5. Why does the teaching leave the meaning of Paul's reference to the law unresolved?
6. Which enduring principles does the teaching draw from the passage despite differences between ancient Corinth and modern culture?

ANSWER KEY – GROUP GUIDE

Basic

1. 14:34–35
2. Scripture
3. prophesying
4. silent
5. home
6. order

Challenging

1. Phoebe
2. hypotasso
3. voluntary
4. harsh
5. dishonor
6. law