

### **"What does 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 mean?"**

**WES:** Welcome to the Radically Christian Bible study podcast. I'm your host, Wes McAdams. Here we have one goal: Learn to love like Jesus. Right now we are working our way through a series that is called "What Does This Passage Mean?" and we are taking requests from the audience. So if you have a passage that you would like for us to discuss, you can send that to us. You can use the contact page at RadicallyChristian.com, or you can leave a voicemail. We would love for you to do that. The number is (707) 238-2216.

Today I am joined by my friend, a preacher that I look up to, that I have a huge amount of regard and respect for his scholarship and his love for the Lord and his love for the church, Steven Cuffle. Thank you so much for being with us again, brother.

**STEVEN:** It's a blessing to be here. Thank you for having me.

**WES:** I am so excited to hear your thoughts on this passage. We were talking, before I hit the record button, that I gave you the passage and I said, "Hey, let's talk about this," and I really didn't even spend a whole lot of time thinking about what the passage was. Somebody had suggested a passage, and I just gave it to you and I didn't even really stop to think about the passage or all of the controversy behind it. And this is certainly one of those passages that is very controversial, that has the potential, especially in our world today, to get us in trouble no matter what we say on it. But I think that that highlights a tendency that we have to jump to application and to modern interpretation and questions and "What do we do with this" before

we even stop to talk about, "Well, what does it mean" before we talk about "How does it apply." So that's what I'm excited about, just walking through with you, just observing the text, looking at what it says and then what it means, especially what it meant in the original context, and then we'll talk, obviously, about application, as well.

So the passage we're talking about is 1 Corinthians chapter 14. I'll read the text. Verses 34 and 35 are the verses we're specifically talking about, but then I'm just going to throw it over to Steven and hear your thoughts on where we should start the observation process. So 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 says, "The women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church."

So I guess we could just stop there and say, okay, it says what it says; it means what it means. Let's just go home and shut it all down, but we won't do that, obviously. So, Steven, where should we start this discussion as we try to figure out what does this passage mean?

**STEVEN:** I like to -- again, we talked a little bit about this before we started. There's two things that you can do when you're reading a document. You can try to take the role of the writer or you can try and take the role of the hearer. And I've heard people argue before, "Well, Paul meant this when he said such-and-such," and that always makes me a little bit nervous because I'm not a mind reader, and any time somebody says, "Well, this person really means this," what they're trying to do is read that person's mind, and that's always dangerous.

And so I prefer to take the role of the hearer, and when I come to the passage, the questions that I ask would be, "How would one of the Christians in Corinth in the first century -- how would they hear these things?" And so there's a bigger context already. We have a letter where Paul is answering problems that they've got, he's answering specific questions that they've asked, and one of the difficulties we have is we don't have their list of questions. So he's dealing with questions they've asked, problems that are arising, and so there's already sort of a dialogue between the hearers and the speaker.

But in addition to that, he's writing to a very particular people in a very particular cultural and social and historical context, and we have to remember when we come to this that these are not 21st century Christians; they're Christians in an ancient world, and, in particular, in ancient Rome. And one of the things that sort of guided the ancient Romans -- there were two things: They had their law, their written law, which they're really proud of, and they have another thing called the mos maiorum, which is sort of like the way that they went about living and interpreting their written law. And our legal system sort of works like this. We call it the law in "precedent," is the word that we like to use. But this was even greater than precedent. It was the way people lived, and you could get punished for violating either one of those things. If you violated the cultural norms, you could get in trouble, and if you violated the written code, you could get in trouble.

And so in the midst of all this, you've got this group of people who are Christians first, but they're also Romans -- at least they live in Rome -- and they're being guided by two sets of rules, if we want to think of it like that.

First, God's law, God's will for them, and, second, this other Roman law, and both types of Roman law. And a lot of that comes into play with what you see in this book because Christianity is a very liberating religion. It sets you free. And it seems like there's a struggle between freedom and rule. Not only how do we apply God's rules even though we're free, but, also, what do we do with these other rules? What do we do with the culture we live in, the society we live in? What do we do with Roman law, with *mos maiorum*?

And so there's a lot of all that going on, especially when it comes to the idea of coverings, when it comes to the idea of speaking. All of those things are covered in the Roman code of conduct. I know we're not talking about 1 Corinthians 11, but just to give some insight into how that impacts the way we might read that, it was shameful for a woman to bear her arm. We have historical accounts of men talking about a woman has exposed her entire self because she showed a little bit of her forearm. So imagine the shock if you have these women going and revealing, not just their arm, but their entire head. I mean, so you can sort of see how that would, like, all fit together. And when we get to this section, I think a lot of that is also going to come into play.

So we've got biblical precedent, God's will, cultural pressures, all of these things rolled into this passage, and it's important that we ask ourselves, as a Christian -- a Roman Christian in Corinth in the first century, how would I hear what Paul says? Because if we erase that and we come to this as a 21st-century Christian with none of that to inform us, the answer is that, in a "church," whatever that means, that women can't talk at all. I mean, and that would be -- that would be how you would read that. And so we need all

of those things to sort of inform us so we can not only read the words that are on the page, but hear them the way they would have heard them. Does that make sense?

**WES:** Yeah. Yeah, I think that's exactly right, and I think that it's something -- I often joke that when we say the word "context," typically, people -- in fact, if you get on, like, BibleGateway.com and you search for a verse, it'll come up with the single verse, and then you can click on the link that says, "Read it in context," and what they show you is the verse before it and the verse after it. And I've often joked that that's what we think we mean when we say, "Read this passage in context."

Well, there is the immediate context, and part of that is the verse before it and the verse after it, but more immediate is the chapter that it's in or the book that it's in, and then you have, like, all of Paul's letters. That's the context, as well. And then you have the entire New Testament or the entire canon of scripture all together, or you have, as you pointed out, the historical context and the cultural context and the literary context. You have so many layers to context that I think sometimes we ignore all of that and we just have this very flat reading that ignores all that, and you're not going to come away with the right understanding. And if we don't have the right understanding, then there's no way we can have the right application.

So before we even get to the application, we have to try our very best to figure out what we can, and, obviously, there's a lot that we can't understand about that context because we're foreigners, both to that place, but also to that time. And so, yeah, I think that that's really helpful to point out a lot of that cultural context, historical context.

**STEVEN:** And if we make that mistake, we always have to remember that we're justified by faith because God is gracious, and when we make these mistakes, we should fix them. But I read through the scriptures knowing that I'm constantly making these types of mistakes, and I have to remind myself that when we do that, we're not saying anything bad about the Bible. We're saying, like you mentioned, "I'm removed by 2,000 years. I'm in a different culture. I'm speaking a different language," and so we have to kind of sift through a lot in order to get back to what was originally written and understood.

And when I make those mistakes, I'm not calling into question my salvation, and so it's not like all this time I was lost but only now I've gotten the correct understanding of these two verses, so now I'm okay. We would constantly be discovering that we're lost. And I think part of the pushback we often get when we hear something new is we think, "Well, that's not what I've always believed," and people sort of worry, you know, was I always lost and now I'm -- and so if we talk about anything new today, I would encourage people who are listening to, first of all, question it. I mean, check and see if it's right. And other than that, if you come to a new conclusion or you learn something new, it only enriches and deepens your appreciation for God and for scripture. It doesn't call into question any of those other things we've talked about.

**WES:** I'm so glad that you said that. And I've often remarked to people that I think that's what's missing in a lot of our Bible study. This transcends this conversation on this particular passage, and it really applies to every single Bible study in which we engage, that it always has to be undergirded with a

right understanding of grace and salvation, that if we think we're saved by right understanding of scripture, then we will constantly study fearfully or we will refrain from study in fear of accidentally stumbling on something that shows us we're lost. And so it's just a really unhealthy way to study scripture, but I think it's a trap into which many of us have fallen, and I think we have to avoid that by, as you said, understanding that I'm saved because I know Jesus, because my faith is in Jesus. I'm saved by God's grace because I am in Christ.

And so having that confidence allows us to say, "You know what? I'm going to look at this passage, and I may come away with the same understanding I've always had of this passage, but even if I learn something new, I haven't discovered that I've been lost all of this time, because I'm not saved or lost based on my understanding of every passage of scripture. I'm saved or lost based on whether or not I'm in a relationship with God through Jesus." And I think that has to undergird this conversation and every time we study scripture.

**STEVEN:** Yes. Amen.

**WES:** Okay. So with that sort of undergirding there -- and I think that's so important -- let's talk about 1 Corinthians 14. You've mentioned that, obviously, we're listening to, as it were, one side of a -- I always like to put it like "one side of a telephone conversation." We're hearing Paul's side of the conversation, but we're missing the Corinthians' side of the conversation, but we can sort of piece together a lot of what that dialogue might have been like, what questions they might have been asking. We know some of the things with which they're struggling, and, as you said, that liberation and that

freedom that they now have in Christ and how do they live that out in a way that brings glory to God. So in this chapter specifically, what's kind of going on that might help set the stage for understanding what he means in verses 34 and 35?

**STEVEN:** There's apparently a lot of confusion, and in the very beginning of the letter you've got these different groups, and so you've got a church that's fractured and following different teachers probably teaching different things about many topics. You sort of get an idea in chapter 14 that when they're coming together -- a lot like in chapter 11 where they're breaking up into different groups to take the Lord's supper. And Paul's response to that is, "You're not even taking the Lord's supper." You could sort of say the same thing about their coming together. If we're getting a view into worship here in chapter 14, they're not even coming together to worship. They're coming together in a community -- I like to think of the word "church," whenever that shows up, you know, as a community of believers. They're not really a community. They're fractured into these different neighborhoods or suburbs. You know, they've isolated themselves. And it's almost like they're -- whenever they start to teach -- which a lot of chapter 14 deals with teaching, either prophecy or speaking in tongues -- they're breaking off into their little groups and listening to their own teachers, and Paul's response generally through this chapter is, "Don't do that. Don't break off into these little groups and listen to these different teachers saying different things. You all need to listen to one person speaking at a time, and everybody else needs to be quiet." He'll actually use the word "silent." And, "If you're speaking in a tongue and nobody is there to interpret, then you need to be

silent, too, because you're not helping the group. You're actually sort of just isolating yourself and lifting yourself up."

And so everything he's saying leading up to the section that we read about the women is sort of this idea of decorum and how do you have -- "peace" is a word that he'll use. "God is not a God of confusion but a God of peace." How do we have this unity and cohesion among the community so that we're all hearing the same things and we're all asking questions about the same things and we're doing this together rather than in those separate and fragmented groups? And so that's sort of going to then get us into the discussion in verse 34 and following about the women, where he really seems to be focused on them doing Christianity, you know, living together as a community of believers, rather than breaking off into those smaller, fragmented groups, very much like in chapter 11. And so that's sort of the larger context of chapter 14 as a whole.

And he rounds that up -- or finishes that up with verse 33 right before the section we're focusing on. "God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." Now, whether that goes with -- you know, which verse that goes with, 33 or 34, it doesn't really change what he's saying. We're all in this together, not only as a local community of faith, but in the larger church. We are all in this together. And that's important. And so it's -- it is a section -- a passage of scripture that is supposed to inspire unity and cohesion, not create division, and any interpretation that is going to go through chapter 14 and use it to create divisions is an abuse. It's a misunderstanding. Let's say that. It's a misunderstanding of what Paul is trying to accomplish with this section.

*I just want to take a short break from our Bible study to tell you that if you are enjoying this discussion, you might also enjoy my book "Beyond the Verse." You can find the audio version of the book at RadicallyChristian.com/audible. And if you're not already an audible subscriber, you can actually get my book for free when you sign up for a free trial, so go to RadicallyChristian.com/audible.*

*Now back to the Bible study.*

**WES:** Yeah, that's so helpful, I think, to frame it like that. And I love the way you put it, like suburbs or like their own little communities, and I think that's exactly what's happening, and I think that it goes all the way back to the beginning of the letter, the first three chapters, about the divisions that exist amongst them, and then, as you get into -- like you said, into chapter 11 and their taking of the Lord's supper, and then as he transitions a little bit to -- in chapter 12, to the purpose of the gifts and the existence of these various gifts. And you used the word "abuse" a second ago of the scripture, but there was really an abuse of the spiritual gifts, and it was -- the motivation wasn't there. The motivation was wrong and twisted and distorted, and so he reminds them, just like he does in Romans 12, about the importance of these gifts existing for the building up of the body and that -- I love the words you used: "Unity" and "cohesion" and "bringing together the body of Christ."

And then we have chapter 13 there in between 12 and 14 and all about love, and that's the theme of this podcast and of my website, of studying with the goal of learning to love like Jesus. And I love that you said that anything -- any use of verses 34 and 35, or any use of scripture in any way to

divide and to hold someone under our thumb, or whatever manipulative type of carnal motivation we might have, is out of step with the gospel because all of this is about unity and cohesion. And understanding that that's the goal, and that's Paul's goal, that's Jesus' goal, I think is paramount for understanding what he's talking about here.

**STEVEN:** Yeah, I agree.

**WES:** So you mentioned briefly about him using the word "silent." For me, if I'm observing chapter 14, specifically the immediate context around verses 34 and 35, that's one of the things that stands out to me is the fact that women aren't the only ones that are instructed to be silent, that he gives this silence command -- or this silence instruction, "Hey, you-all need to stop talking," and, "You need to talk," and, "You don't need to talk," and, "Here's the situation under which anyone should be speaking." Let's talk about that for a second and just kind of look at who he's telling to speak and who he's telling to not speak and why.

**STEVEN:** And so start off with just the word that he uses. It means "to say nothing." And so whatever context -- however we understand this, we then have to move forward, you know, in a consistent way. And so if he is saying in verse 34 that the women should say nothing in the churches, and if that's what we walk away with as our understanding -- which is a possible understanding -- then you have to work forward with that consistently, and you would have to have the women saying nothing in the churches.

But like you were mentioning, this isn't the first time he uses that. He tells the people who are speaking in tongues to keep silent if there is no interpreter. So there is a moment, there is a time, when speaking in tongues

would be profitable, but you have to have that other person there to make it profitable. He has other prophets that are speaking, and when a second prophet begins to speak, the first has to be quiet. And I don't envision this being like one prophet cutting the other off. I envision it one person speaking, and when they're finished, another would arise and have something else to say. So I don't think it's, you know, having -- people constantly interrupting one another, I don't think, is the image there. But when somebody else stands up to speak, the first person then is done and they don't get to interrupt the second speaker.

And one reason why this might be important is because, first of all, the spirit of the prophets is subject to the prophets, and, secondly, the Christians in the first century were supposed to weigh what was given to them because there's a chance that a prophet might mistake their own personal opinion or their own thoughts for something given to them by God. And a second prophet may arise and contradict them, and the first speaker is to be silent and allow the second to explain, you know, to reveal what it is that God is saying. And so being quiet and listening carefully is really important for learning, especially when you have two different viewpoints that might be presented.

And then the third time that word is used -- or the next time that word is used is with the women. Well, in each of the other two scenarios, there is a time where they are to be silent and there is a time where it's okay to speak. And so one would assume, moving forward into this section about women, that the same will be true: There is a time where they should be silent and there is a time where it's okay to speak. Now, admittedly, that's

not in verses 34 through 36. It just says that they're to be silent, and he even sort of doubles down: "They are not permitted to speak."

And so we have to ask important questions. Is this an unlimited prohibition against the female voice when we are gathered together as a community, or is there a context in which this exists, whether it's scriptural, cultural, or otherwise? And that really is at the heart of sort of understanding what's going on here. Is this just a blanket prohibition, or is there a specific situation, perhaps, that Paul is addressing? But the word itself does mean to make no noise, to say nothing, and so that's important. You know, we have to deal with what's there. We can't just gloss over it and say, "Well, he doesn't really mean that." No. I mean, that's what the word means, and that's how they would have understood it.

**WES:** Yeah. So let's go back and sort of set the stage one more time before we really get into that specific interpretation. And let's -- because I love what you said, that the way he's painting what should happen is that the speakers that are presenting either a word in tongue or a word of prophecy -- the speakers should not be interrupting each other and it should be interpreted. And if we go back earlier in chapter 14, he explains why that should be.

And kind of paint for us a picture of what you think was happening prior to this instruction. What might that worship have looked like, and Paul is saying, "No, no, no. No more of that." Obviously, we have the Lord's supper where they're not waiting for each other, and Paul says, "That's not the Lord's supper." So what sort of lawlessness, what sort of confusion, what sort of disunity might there have been prior to this set of instructions?

**STEVEN:** We sort of have to jump into Roman culture and -- because you're going to be a Christian in whatever culture you live in. Christians in China are Chinese; they live in a Chinese culture. They are believers in that culture. And so we have to sort of go back and learn what it would have been like in the Roman world, because these people are coming out of a religion. The Greco-Roman world is a deeply religious culture. You see that in Acts 17, where Paul says, "I recognize that you are very religious." Yeah, they were. They were very religious. Of course you have a spectrum of belief, just like we do today, but the people who were very religious, when they would go to prophets, when they would go to religious festivals -- orgiastic, in every sense that you could understand that word, is a good description of what those were like. It was sort of like a free-for-all, and you would go -- at the temple at Delphi, you know, we have this picture of this very peaceful scene where people are sitting around and they listen to the oracle speak, and then everybody just waits for it to be explained. That's not really what Delphi looked like. You had people going underground and exposing themselves to noxious gases and coming out, and they're intoxicated. And so you have people falling all over the place, speaking in unutterable or un-understandable, incoherent sentences. You have prophets, there are priests dealing with all of these different people who are speaking and explaining it to this crowd, and everybody would be there. There were people throwing money trying to get their questions answered, and it really is just a chaotic scene. If you can picture in movies like images of the bazaar, big marketplaces where people are just crowded everywhere and the voices are all overlapping, that's what a religious experience would have

been like if you're a Greco-Roman. It's not really ordered, and it doesn't matter. It doesn't have to be because you're not there for each other; you're there for yourself.

And so if that's sort of like their religious experience and their religious culture, we would expect them to sort of carry that over into Christianity and think, "Well, now we're just going to come to this new God in the same way that we always have," and I really think that's part of the reason why Paul has to lay this down in this section and say, "Look, this is not your old religion. This is not the old God that you're used to. This is different. And it actually would have been the decorum and peaceful nature of the Christian assembly that would have set it apart and distinguished it from everything else that is going on in the world around them. And when we see today -- you can go online and look, if you so desire. You know, you can see just these crazy gatherings of people where you've got individuals rolling on the floor and everybody's talking and there's just dancing and chaos. That is more akin to a Roman worship than it is to what I think Paul is describing here. Very much Paul is like, look, this is about mutually edifying one another. This is about what you can give to somebody else, not what you can get for yourself.

And even before that, this is about glorifying God, who is a God of peace, not of chaos. And when God created, in Genesis, in the beginning -- one of the cool things that differentiates the Christian or the biblical creation narrative from all of the others that exist is God is a very structured and ordered God, bringing order out of the chaos that exists, putting everything in its place. Everything reproduces after its kind, right? There's all this

order. Wherein as you go into the other creation accounts and everything is chaos and war and blood flowing and people growing up out of the -- I mean, it's just a mess. And so there's a very different nature. Divinity that you're seeing in scripture is very different from all of the other Greco-Roman understandings. And so just imagine the most chaotic scene you possibly can, and that's probably what was happening because that's what those people were used to. And so Paul has to come and say, "Stop it. That's not who God is and that's not who you can be because now you're God's children and you need to behave like your Father."

**WES:** Yeah. Wow, Steven, I think that is incredibly helpful to sort of paint that picture. And whenever I think about the church at Corinth, I always think about the contrast between what this church must have been like at its worst and what other churches, specifically those in a more Jewish context, would have been like. I can't help but think that most churches, prior to the gospel going to the Gentile world and these more Greco-Roman people coming to faith in Jesus -- most churches would have been very similar to synagogues, I would think, that would have been much more ordered. They would have been much more unified, one person speaking at a time, less chaos, less -- and that's what not only Paul was used to, but reflected, as you said, the nature of God, who is a teaching God, a God of order, not of chaos, and so that's how most Jewish followers of Jesus would have experienced church life.

And I can't help but think what that must have been like for them if they came to Corinth and saw what was going on there and Paul's desire for there to be unity between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. And if

this is the difference between a Gentile church and a Jewish church, again, no wonder Paul had to deal with so many accusations from his Jewish brothers, like, "Hey, this is what Paul's churches look like. They're a mess. These people, they're engaged in sexual immorality. It's chaos. They're yelling and screaming, and, you know, there's people talking over one another." And Paul has to, for the sake of -- for the sake of the unity of the church, for the sake of the spread of the gospel, for the sake of his own reputation as an apostle of Jesus, he has to try to bring order to, again, as you said, the chaos that reflected who they used to be rather than who they're supposed to be in Christ.

So kind of with that -- and I think that's really good, the way you've laid all of that out for us -- let's get to, specifically, verses 34 and 35 and ask, okay, if we were Christians in that context and this is what had been going on, and we're listening to what Paul is saying to us, and this letter is being read to us sitting in the Corinthian church for the first time and we're thinking about what does this mean for -- specifically in these verses, for women, how might they have heard these instructions?

**STEVEN:** It depends on how it fits into the question they've asked and into this section. You go back to chapter 11 and you have women praying and prophesying, and we don't know exactly where that's happening. Is that happening in the church, you know, when the whole group is gathered together? Was it a woman's study where the women are down by the river praying, you know, like Lydia? We don't know. And any answer in that -- anybody who says, "Oh, this is definitely what was happening," it's an assumption.

And so when you come to this passage, how would they have heard this? They would have heard that, as far as their culture is concerned -- and I think it's really important to remember the cultural aspect of this, because in the old law, this idea of women not speaking is not necessarily present because you have women like Deborah who are leading, you know, Israel, guiding Israel. You have prophetesses, Anna in the temple, and so this idea of a woman filling the role of prophetess or giving spiritual guidance is not absent from the Jewish culture, from the Jewish background of scripture. But when you come to the Greco-Roman world -- again, mentioning earlier that a woman exposing her arm was scandalous, there is even an account -- I can't remember the guy's name. I wish I could. He was a Quintus. His first name was Quintus. He divorced his wife, and the reason why he divorced his wife is because he saw her talking to another woman in public. And the reason he divorced his wife is because he knew right then that she was no good, because if she's speaking to another woman in public, eventually she'll speak to another man in public, and what sort of indiscretion could that lead to? And so rather than have shame brought upon his family, when he saw his wife speak in public, he divorced her.

And so we have to step back and realize that we live in a radically different world than the first century. Women were not allowed to speak in public. They were not allowed, generally speaking. There are a few very rare exceptions. Generally speaking, they're not allowed to hold public office; they're not allowed to come and debate laws. There's even another instance where one of the consuls of Rome is walking through the streets, and they had just passed some laws that barred upper-class women from

purchasing certain luxury items -- you know, austerity for the sake of the empire. And these women came and were speaking to this consul, and his response to them is, "You are violating the very fabric of Roman society by, first of all, speaking in public, and, secondly, speaking in public to a man who is not your husband." And so he censures them and sends them home, and they sort of double down almost as a punishment for the audacity of these women to come and speak to a man in public.

So sort of like that as this cultural background, if you can imagine, you know, in the beginning of chapter 14, this is something we can't forget. Paul is concerned about what happens when an outsider comes into your assembly. If they come in and they see you acting crazy, they're going to say, "Oh, this is just another one of those mystery cults." But if they come in and you're prophesying and teaching and they hear you speaking in a way that they can understand, they're going to be convicted. And so this idea of being concerned for the outsider is another layer of context that comes to this section.

And more than likely, when they hear Paul say the women should keep silent in the community, I don't think they're hearing that the women have to be quiet all the time, but what they likely would have heard is that the social structure for women not speaking in public is still in place, but it's not because God doesn't want to hear female voices; it's because the culture you live in doesn't. And that is a really important distinction because, otherwise, I'm not sure how to make sense of this other than to say that, in Christianity, women have no voice, which I don't think is the case because we see people like Phoebe coming and bringing the letter to the Romans;

you see -- you know, Chloe's people are even mentioned at the beginning of this letter. Women are involved in first-century Christianity. But with this idea that you have to be careful how you appear to outsiders, you have to fit Christianity in the culture where you live, that -- this, then, begins to make sense, that if a man will divorce his wife because she spoke in public, then you really need to be careful how you're behaving because you could shame Christ in the eyes of these people, and so you have to be careful that you're not behaving in a way -- despite the fact that you have this liberty, you have to be careful that you're not behaving in a way that actually brings shame upon Jesus rather than honor.

And so it seems like, with all of those things considered, when Paul gets to this section, he's telling them that you need to be careful how you talk and when you talk, because you have got brand-new converts who are still laden with all of the cultural trappings of being a Roman, and you have outsiders who are coming in, and you don't want to offend either one of those groups and drive them away from Jesus because of the freedom that you have. So in that instance, or in that case, you need to be careful and you need to make sure that when you're gathered together that you don't do anything that would be considered improper or breaking social customs or propriety, because God is a God of peace, and the idea of peace isn't just with confusion; it's also the bond that links us together in unity in the Spirit. We are maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and that sort of frames, in my mind, what you're seeing here. Does that make sense?

**WES:** Yeah, absolutely. I think that's incredibly helpful. And so I think that acknowledging -- or let me try to sum up what I'm hearing you say, in that if

we took this -- if we interpreted this as a blanket prohibition on women's voices, the application -- not just to us, but the application in the first century would have been that they couldn't sing as a congregation. The women couldn't even participate in -- it's hard to know exactly what the singing was like in the first century, but assuming they're singing together congregationally, if we took this as a blanket prohibition, they couldn't even participate in that, nor could they visit and talk to one another during times of fellowship. If they're together as a body, they couldn't even have conversations with one another if this is a blanket prohibition. But if we understand it more in the context of -- and, again, I think that looking at it in this order of the prophets and the speaking in tongues -- would you put it more in the category of who is leading in that assembly and who is taking that teaching and instruction role, that he is saying that this isn't the time for women to participate in that way, specifically in this context, because of the potential shame that it might bring upon the entire group for that reason?

**STEVEN:** Yes. And that fits right in line with what you see. The one speaking in tongues is leading the group. The one prophesying would be, in a sense, leading the group, at least leading the discussion, and I think that gets into even the next part about asking the questions. But yeah, I think you're exactly right, that the idea seems to be following through that vein of thought in that when you're gathered together, it's not really the time for the women to sort of lead the discussion, so to speak, because it would be reprehensible.

**WES:** I think that that -- the fact that Paul is concerned about, one, the practical implications of our behavior as it pertains to our unity and the

practical implications of our behavior as it pertains to the shame or the honor brought upon the church from the outside, those are a couple of considerations, as we sort of transition in the last few minutes here to application and how do we work this out -- we tend to be -- speaking for myself and the Christians I've experienced in my life, we tend to be very much dismissive of practical reasons why we might do something or not do something, and unity very rarely plays a big part in our thought process. We want to boil everything down to, "Well, is it right or is it wrong? Who cares if it's unifying or creates disunity? I just want to know, is it right or wrong? And I'm going to do what's right regardless of what anybody else thinks, regardless of what anybody else does." But for Paul, he cares very much what other believers think and what other people -- even outsiders, what unbelievers think, and what we do and how it reflects on the message that people are hearing and seeing in the church. It matters to Paul beyond just whether or not it's intrinsically right or wrong. For Paul, that's sometimes very rarely a part of the discussion. It's not about whether it's intrinsically right or wrong; it's about what does this cause to happen within the church and how does it reflect on the church from the outside? Would you agree with that from Paul's perspective?

**STEVEN:** Oh, absolutely. That seems to be his primary concern going through here, is these things are creating fractures, and so he's coming and sort of patching the mortar, so to speak, not only internally, but also -- I like the shame-and-honor context that you put it in. We want to do things that bring honor to Jesus even if that means giving up my liberty, and that is something that -- as a Christian in the United States, that is something that,

personally, I'm not good at. You know, we're told to defend our liberty, to stand up for your rights, and the gospel says the opposite: Give up your liberty, give up your rights for the sake of bringing honor to Christ. And that seems to be what is happening here. Yeah, you have the liberty to speak if you speak in tongues, but don't. Stop because of unity. If another prophet is speaking, stop because of unity.

And that's the context that we should probably understand the women, too, is you have this liberty, but for whatever reason, it's disjoining the church, or it's bringing shame on the church, so give it up. And I think that that is a more helpful way to understand what is written rather than this just blanket prohibition for all time in all circumstances.

**WES:** And that really helps frame this in that this has application to far more than just, quote-unquote, "women's roles in the church." And I hate even that phrase, "women's roles in the church," because it frames it all in terms of what women are allowed or disallowed from doing, rather than "gender roles in the church." That's a much broader application. But I think it's even broader than that in that it is the demeanor and the behavior and the attitude of all Christians in the church, and if we really were to embrace this demeanor, this posture of, as you said, giving up our liberties, giving up our rights for what makes for peace, what makes for unity, what makes for bringing honor upon the church, it would change the way a lot of us do a lot of things.

But even if we just narrow our discussion to the worship assembly, I've seen -- and, again, I don't want to come across like an old stick in the mud, but I have seen over the last generation where worship -- across the

board, we are tending to more and more think of worship as a talent show, and if someone has a talent or an ability to do something, then we ought to put the spotlight on them. And I think that that flies in the face of what Paul is saying here in that the assembly shouldn't be a talent show. You and I shouldn't be up there preaching so that we can show off or showcase our talents. It shouldn't be about us or about what people think of us. But, unfortunately, even as it pertains to that, we could talk about men's roles in the church and how sometimes we are trying to elevate or showcase or spotlight talented men, and that is wrong. What are your thoughts on how this passage or all of these ideas apply to us and, specifically, as we interact in the assembly?

**STEVEN:** Yeah, I think that one of the keys here is that word "submission," which is, I think, what you're talking about. You know, when a speaker is speaking, if, when they're done, at the end of -- whether it's a class or a sermon, or whatever the context is, when they're done, if my thought is, "Man, that's a great speaker," then either I have missed the point or they did, because the point of the teacher teaching is to glorify the resurrected King, to glorify God. And as a hearer, I need to hear in that context, too. You know, it's entirely possible for somebody to get up and just do a masterful job of preaching Jesus, and all I'm focused on is, "Wow, what great rhetoric." And so we have to both speak and hear in this submissive way, and we have to both serve and receive service in this submissive way whenever we are gathered together. People don't serve me because I'm so great and important; they serve me because they're honoring their king. I don't serve others because they're better than me; I serve them because of Jesus. And so

everything is about Jesus. The way we view ourselves, the way we view others, the way we serve, the way we receive, that is all about Jesus.

And in that context, then, this isn't difficult because men are told the same thing. This idea of submission, it's not just for women. But you have Paul in other places using the same word to talk about submitting one to another out of reverence for Jesus. And so in every circumstance that we find ourselves, people are always concerned with, "Well, what is the safe thing to do?" The safe thing is to submit yourself always, first to God, and then to other people. And if that's what you're doing, if that's your mind-set, then that really is the way that Jesus walked.

And so when it comes to women in this assembly in ancient Corinth, they have a couple of options. They can stand loud and proud and say, "No, I have my rights," or they can look at the church around them, at the culture around them, and say, "If I exercise the full extent of my liberty, it is going to cause problems, so rather than glorifying myself or taking full advantage of whatever I have been given by God, I'm going to give those things up and I am going to voluntarily submit myself to whatever the others expect so that, first, there can be unity in the church and, second, honor brought to Jesus in the surrounding community." And that makes this concept applicable, like you mentioned, to everybody in every place in every time, and it cuts -- it's important to remember that it cuts both ways, regardless of gender, because this is about a mind-set, voluntary submission for the sake of others -- first, for God, and second, others, and that's -- that is a significant truth. It cannot be overstated how important that truth is.

**WES:** Yeah. Man, that's so good, Steven, and I'm so thankful for this

conversation because while I definitely fall into the category of complementarian, as far as the egalitarian-versus-complementarian discussion, I think so often that whole discussion is framed wrongly, and people from both sides are pushing an agenda. And even that idea of an agenda is contrary to the gospel itself because the gospel should be our agenda, but so often it's framed in terms of talents and abilities and individuality. And it's like all of those discussion items fly in the face of everything Paul is talking about, because of course there were talented women. Of course there were gifted women. These women that Paul is talking about had the gift of prophecy. These women had the gift of speaking in tongues, yet he still curtailed their individuality and their expression of that individuality in the assembly. And that not only has bearing on discussions about complementarianism, but it has bearings, as we've been saying, on every area of Christianity that every one of us, no matter our talent or gender or ability -- all of us have to curtail our liberties and our individuality for the sake of the greater good, for the sake of the unity of the body of Christ and the glory of Jesus. But so often, in our selfishness, in our carnality, we're unwilling to do that, and that, I think, gets to the heart of the wrong way we have these discussions, is that it reflects a carnality rather than the spirit of Jesus.

**STEVEN:** Amen. I agree.

**WES:** Well, Steven, thank you again for the historical context, for your love for the scriptures and your love for the church, your love for people, and it comes through in everything that you say and do, and I appreciate you bringing that to this discussion today.

**STEVEN:** Thank you. Likewise, your love is evident in everything you do. Love you, Brother.

**WES:** Likewise, Brother. Love you, too. Thanks, Brother.

*Thank you so much for being part of the Radically Christian Bible Study Podcast today. We hope that you've enjoyed this episode. I want to give a special thanks to Travis Pauley and to our McDermott Road church family for making this podcast possible. As always, we love you, God loves you, and we hope that you have a wonderful day.*