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Let Women Be Silent in the Church

An Exegetical Study of I Cor. 14:33b-36

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No other Pauline statement denies leadership to women in the Church services, and several passages in Paul and elsewhere (I Cor. 11:5; Acts 18:26; 21:9) presume it. Only two Pauline passages, other than this one, have traditionally been interpreted as the subordination of women. These are I Cor. 11:3-16 (women's heads to be covered during prayer in the worship service) and I Cor. 7 (sexual relations in marriage).

To appropriate the contemporary reading of Paul's statements which became a heated issue since the advent of the women's movement, a proper exegesis of passages like I Cor. 14:33b-36 become as much as necessary. Yet, no one has been able to offer a convincing exegesis. Naturally, then, as long as the point of this text remains obscure, the debate will continue unresolved.

I. Textual Analysis

I Corinthians 14:33b-36 has been taken by an increasing number of scholars to be a clear case of interpolation of non-Pauline material into this Pauline letter.¹ This is argued on several bases:

1. *The Textual Difficulties:* The textual problem involves a case of transposition of vv. 34-55 from their generally recognized place to a position after v. 40. The witness for this transposition are generally late and chiefly Western. More important is the fact that there is no manuscript evidence for the commission of these verses. Thus, even Conzelmann admits: "The transposition of v.34f. to follow v.40 in *DG* is, of course, no argument for the assumption of an interpolation; it is a secondary simplification. Its compass does not coincide with that of the interpolation which is to be assumed."²

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2. *v.33b-36 interrupt what precedes and follows*: The argument that these verses interrupt the flow of the argument, that they do not fit with what precedes and follows, but address a different subject. Sometimes, the fact of transposition is pointed that it was perceived early on, that these verses, do not fit in their present location. For example, there are significant vocabulary that these few verses have in common with what precedes and follows—*hupotasso* (vv. 32, 34); *laleo* (v.14, 23), etc.

3. *I Cor. 14:33b-36 contradicts I Cor. 11:5*: This depends on how one understands I Cor. 14:33b ff. which we can examine later, but it may be asked, if the contradiction is obvious, why did not the interpolator notice it? Further, if the contradiction is clear, why is there no evidence for commission of this text by a later copyist?

4. *Peculiarities of linguistic usage*: Finally, there are few linguistic peculiarities such as 'silence', 'speak/speech', etc., which we shall see later. At this point, our working hypothesis will be that this material is Pauline and can be explained in terms of its immediate context—the discussion of prophecy and the judging of prophecies in chapter 14 of I Corinthians.

II. The Immediate Context

The study of prophecy in the Pauline letters has been undertaken by numerous scholars.³ It is clear that Paul thought of prophecy as an important gift for building up the Christian community (Rom. 5:20) rather than the uplifting of the individual.

Paul indicates that prophecy is not only a desirable gift but also¹ one which the Corinthians should seek (I Cor. 14:1). I Cor. 14:30 makes clear that prophecy is not a learned art, but depends on the receiving of revelation from God, which must then be delivered.

Paul does not view prophecy in the same way as the oracles of the Pythia at Delphi. The Pythia spoke in a state of trance or 'possession' by the God which induced an ecstasy. This led to utterances including moans, cries, and phrases to be interpreted later by a prophet.⁴ Christian prophecy does not need such interpretation, but it may need 'weighing'.

In short, if anything was like pagan utterances, it was *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) which led outsiders to the conclusion that the speaker was mad (I Cor. 14:23). Perhaps, a large part of the problem at Corinth was that the Corinthians viewed prophecy on the 'mantic model', while Paul viewed it more along the line of certain Old Testament models.⁵ Paul indicates clearly that the prophet had enough conscious control over his utterance that he could wait until another finished, before standing and delivering the prophecy (I Cor. 14:29-32). Apparently, the Corinthians thought that they just could not wait, and so several were blurting out a prophecy at one time with the result being chaos and confusion.

Prophecy is addressed to the whole congregation—including the men. Since prophecy involved a new word of God, then it had a didactic purpose. Prophecy is not merely a personal testimony. There is nothing in I Cor. 12-14 to suggest that prophecy were gender-specific gifts. How then do we interpret the silencing of women in I Cor. 14:33b-36?

It is evident from what precedes and follows I Cor. 14:33b-36 that Paul is concerned with proper order in the Christian worship. If this passage belongs to between vv.33a and 37, then it is reasonable to accept that Paul is dealing with some sort of disorderliness here. To re-establish the proper order of things, Paul begins by citing the proper rule of order followed in all Churches.

It is difficult to assess whether "let women be silent *in all Churches*" is normal or novel advice from Paul. We know from the Mystery Cults that among the many temples in Corinth there were some (Dionysus, Isis, Serapis) in which women could take important roles in the services and speak. Oepke remarks:

Throughout antiquity, the participation of women is customary. In the Dionysian cult, woman played a very prominent part as maenads and thyads. Priestesses were common...their ministry is not, in the least, restricted to men. Outstanding ecstatic endowment assures women a prophetic rank as Sybils...⁶

From this, we may deduce that the Corinthians were surprised at Paul's silencing of women and that Paul is not

drawing on conventional Corinthians or Greek views of a woman's role in worship. More likely in I Cor. 14:33bff, Paul is dealing with a specific problem in the Corinthian worship service which led him to counsel women to silence.⁷ Indeed, he musters five authorities to get Corinthian women to adhere to this ruling : (1) General Church practice (v. 36b), (2) the law (vs. 34), (3) common conventions of what is proper or disgraceful (v. 35), (4) the word of God (v. 36), and (5) his apostolic authority.⁸

From the immediate context, we may discern two more general problems at work. It appears, the Corinthians are trying to make up their own rules, perhaps, thinking their own word is sufficient, or authoritative or even the word of God for themselves (cf. v.36). We also know from v. 33a, 40 that things were not being done decently, when the spiritual gifts were used in the worship service.

III. Key Words

Hupotasso. This word is important because it provides the main rationale for women to be silent. This word can be translated as "subject oneself", or "be subjected", or "be subordinated". It is used to describe (1) the position of the wife in relation to the husband, (2) the child in relation to parents, (3) slaves in relation to their masters, (4) all men in relation to a secular authority, (5) Christians in relation to Church officials, (6) all in relation to God, and (7) believers in relation to Christ.⁹ In our context, there is a possibility with the first point given above where Paul is telling the women to be subordinated to their own husbands. The reference in v.35b might favour such a view. If it is so, how does this qualify or clarify why Paul tells women to keep silent in the worship service?

The only time silence is associated with submission in the Old Testament is out of respect for God (Hab. 2:20), or one in position of authority (Judges. 3:19), or wise men noted for their knowledge and counsel (Job 29:21)—Job 29:21 has the closest connection with our passage because it involves the silence of respect for a teacher, the silence of someone who is

a learner.¹⁰ Paul then might have commanded women to submit not to their husbands, but to the principles of order in the worship service, the principle of silence and respect shown when another is speaking. This is possibly to show the Corinthians that the Old Testament speaks about a respectful silence, when a word of counsel is spoken (Job. 29:21).

The scenario, therefore, is that during the time of the weighing of the prophet's utterances, some of the wives were asking questions that were disrupting the worship service. The result was chaos. Paul's ruling is that questions should not be asked in worship, since worship was not to be turned into a question—and answer session. The wives should rather ask their husbands at home.

(b) *Laleo*. It refers to an uninspired speech, i.e., questions. Paul had already placed a restriction of time or place on *laleo* earlier in v. 28. Those speaking in tongues are to be silent in Church if there is no interpreter, this silence has to do not with all speech, but with a specific kind of speech indicated by the context. Again in v. 30, there is a command for a prophet to be silent if another begins to speak. Once again, the context indicates that this is not a total ban on the person in question speaking. The object of this command to silence is order, but also all may learn (v. 31). Thus, vv. 34-35 fit in well in their present context. The problem dealt within these verses is an example of what is spoken of in v. 29b—a problem arising during the weighing of the prophecies.¹¹

As a final point, one may ask, why then are women singled out in vv. 34-35? The answer is that they were the causes of the problems (see also I Cor. 11:2ff.). But Paul includes that correction in a letter to all the Corinthians and addresses them all both before our passage (vv. 28-31) and in vv. 36ff. So, they too may avoid this abuse.

IV. The Meaning in the Life of the Corinthian Church

If we assume that Paul corrects the abuse not by banning women from ever speaking in worship, but silencing their particular abuse of speech, we may further ask the background of such people who were opposing to let the women speak in the Church.

The words "you.... only" (v. 36) imply a claim of exclusivity by Paul's opponents. This group consisted of persons who were opposed to participation by women in the services, and who attempted to silence them by decree. The exclusivity refers to their view of pneumatic speech as an exclusively male domain.

Paul's opponents were getting their ideas from some kind of exposure to Judaism and the Synagogue—whether a recent proselyte, or Gentile convert or as man of Jewish background is unclear. To recapitulate, these men wanted the service to correspond to traditions derived from a Synagogue model basing their decree on Torah—referring to Gen. 3:16 and the order of creation in Genesis Ch. 2.

Again, the appeal to Torah was put into the form of commonly used Rabbinic formula for applying to Torah to contemporary life situation.

Finally, they drew their ideas from Hellenistic Jewish tradition. S. Aalen¹² notes evidence from Josephus for the idea that Jewish subordination of wives was part of the law, and Fiorenza¹³ attributes this idea to Hellenistic Jewish missionary tradition. Thus, it may be hypothesized that the participation of women in prayer, prophecy and diakrinosia (the judging of the prophecy) was just as threatening to them and to the traditional religions between the sexes, which they considered natural, as the women's denial of sexuality by continence and cropping of their hair was.

Going beyond the characterization of this group of men, we can make some observations about relations between the parties to this conflict.¹⁴ This Christian society consists of,

1. Husbands and others who agreed with them, and who thought of women only as wives. For this reason, they did not notice that their decree omitted unmarried women.
2. Women and men committed to the eschatological egalitarianism and freedom of the primitive Christian movement, who expressed their identity through continence and symbolic gender denial, as the cropping of hair.
3. Travelling apostles whose influence on the women was often divisive because of the threat which it presented to the husbands.

Against this background, we can now offer a hypothesis on what Paul meant in this passage.¹⁵ To the men of Hellenistic Jewish background, and who believed that the solution to the increasing disorderliness of the services, was imposed a Jewish Synagogue model in which women were required to be silent and subordinate, Paul responded vehemently 'no', standing firm in his original eschatological egalitarianism:

"What! did the word of God proceed from you (males), or are you the only ones it has reached? Paul responded with these rhetorical questions in order to point the absurdity of their presupposition that the mediation of the Spirit in the church was a male prerogative. This rhetorical question required a negative answer because everyone could see that the Spirit had not come only to the men (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3-16), just as it was obvious that the Spirit had not originated with them, but with God.

To the women, and the other members of the Corinthian community devoted to the pre-Pauline eschatological egalitarianism which Paul had preached in Corinth, Paul's teaching was clearly a vindication. What was the impact of this vindication on the Corinthian Church?

In response to a series of follow-up questions in an aggressive and argumentative fashion, Paul writes the letter to which I Cor. 12-14 belonged. In it, he met each question with a reply on that particular issue beginning "concerning". In this letter, then we can see some reflections of the Corinthian response to Paul's message. I Cor. 13 makes much sense as an attempt to counter resentment by the men whom he had opposed. Especially relevant are references to speaking with tongues of Angels, arrogance and love which does not insist on own way. Also striking is his use of the word "All/every", which reinforces the universality of the movement of the Spirit to women and man alike.

V. Conclusion

I Cor. 14:33b-36 is to be regarded as authentic Pauline material, and is to be viewed as an attempt to correct a problem caused by women judging the prophets. Instead of disrupting

the worship atmosphere, they should ask their husband at home. Subordination in v. 34 refers to submission, not to husbands, but to the Church principles of order and decorum in worship. Above all, Paul's exhortation is not contradicted to his eschatological egalitarianism.

References

1. Cf. C.K. Barret, *First Corinthians*, pp. 332-363; H. Conzelmann, *I Corinthian*, p. 246.
2. H. Conzelmann, *Op. cit.*, p. 296, n. 56.
3. Cf. D.H. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979, pp. 110-118; E.E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics in Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, p. 27.
4. J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975, p. 228.
5. Hill, *N.T. Prophecy*, p. 121ff.
6. A. Oepke, Yury, *Theological Dictionary of the N.T.*, Vol. I, 1964, p. 78.
7. Ben Witherington III, "Silence in All Churches", *Women in the Earliest Churches*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1988, p. 97.
8. Witherington II, *Op. cit.*, p. 98.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
12. A. Aalen, "Rabbinic Formula in I Cor. 14:34", *Studia Evangelica*, 87, 1964, p. 517.
13. E.S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, p. 231.
14. S.L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*, Champaign-Urbana: Southern Illinois University, 1980, As cited in by Allison, "Let Women be Silent in the Churches (I Cor. 14:33b-36): What did it mean?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, ND 32:51052, 1988, p. 51-52.
15. The idea is borrowed from R.W. Allison, *Op. Cit.*, p. 51-52.