

An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36

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1 Cor 14:33b-36 -- Just as in all the churches of the saints, 34 let the women/wives in the churches keep silent, for they are not permitted to speak, but rather let them be in submission, just as the law says. 35 but if they want to learn something (as some obviously do), let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is a scandalous thing for wives to speak in church. 36 What!?! Did the word of God originate with you?! Or do you think you were the only ones privileged to receive it?! (Translation mine)

This abrupt statement of prohibition by Paul is almost shocking in its suddenness. At first reading it appears to be "the most blatantly sexist passage"<sup>1</sup> in all the Pauline letters. In fact, it seems so out of harmony with the surrounding verses and with Pauline thought in general (Cf. 1 Cor 11:5; 14:31) that a number of scholars (including Conzelmann, Barrett, Murphy-O'Connor) have concluded that it must be a later interpolation. Clearly there would be no loss to the flow of thought if the reader moved directly from 33a to vs. 37. In fact, several scribes (one as early as the sixth century) were sufficiently perplexed by the abruptness of the passage to move vss. 34,35 to the end of the chapter where they could more easily stand by themselves rather than appear to interrupt the reasoning between vss. 33 and 37.

One suggestion is that a scribe originally omitted the verses, then later corrected his error in the margin of his MS. But E. Earle Ellis offers a suggestion that better explains the "rough seams" between vss. 34, 35 and the larger context. He hypothesizes that it was originally Paul's own marginal note. Since Paul employed an amanuensis in the writing of 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 16:21), and since amanuenses often worked from shorthand notes, it is possible that when Paul was given the final draft so he could

add a closing greeting or make additions or corrections, he, or the amanuensis at his instruction, added this brief instruction to the margin of the MS before sending it to Corinth.<sup>2</sup> It should be kept in mind, however, that although there is some uncertainty about position, no MS lacks the verses, so there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the passage is a later interpolation.

But positioning and abruptness are not the only problems. In these two short verses, women are reduced to silence in "all the churches," no exceptions! And yet, for many years, Christian practice has not followed this rule -- wives have not only asked their husbands before they got home, they have been speaking with varying degrees of authority in all phases of the church service. In addition, it is difficult to harmonize the severity of the sentiments expressed here with Pauline thought elsewhere. Thus in 1 Cor 11:5 he allows women to pray and prophesy in church (provided they are veiled), and in Titus 2:3 he instructs the older women to "teach what is good" and thereby set an example in behavior and speech before the younger women. Furthermore the teaching services of Priscilla (she helped instruct Apollos, a male, Acts 18:26), and the role of Phoebe, who is called a "diakonos" (masc. ending) in Rom 16:1, add more questions to the unequivocal language Paul uses here in 1 Cor 14:34,35.

And so at the very outset, it is legitimate to ask if Paul really intended to reduce women to silence in religious matters? A lexical approach does not resolve the dilemma. Paul here uses the word λαλεῖν, which can be interpreted "chattering." The other common verb for speaking is λεγεῖν, which sometimes connotes more knowledgeable content. However, it is clear in Rom 3:19 that Paul uses these words interchangeably, so there is no clear

grammatical indication of the nature of the silence. Moffatt suggests that "keep quiet" here means more than a prohibition of chattering.<sup>3</sup> It should also be kept in mind that, whatever the nature of the silence, the women thus muzzled were not rabble-rousers. Even if their only desire was to learn (εἰ . . . μαθεῖν θέλουσιν), they were to save their questions for later.

One approach, recently popularized by Wayne Grudem<sup>4</sup> and James Hurley<sup>5</sup>, is to qualify the silence by asserting that it relates only to the evaluation of prophecy Paul has just mentioned in 14:29. Such an evaluation would put the females into a teaching role out of keeping with their subordinate position. However, such a refined definition of "silence" puts a considerable burden on the discriminating ability of the reader. In other words, how is one to tell if the silence refers to evaluating prophecy, or giving a prophecy (which is earlier allowed -- 1 Cor 11:5), or speaking in tongues -- all of which are mentioned in the preceding context? Furthermore, why would Paul use such an all-inclusive word such as silence if he was only qualifying the kind of speaking women were allowed to do? Admittedly, this interpretation was a well-meant attempt to harmonize the sweeping prohibition of 14:34 with the permission to prophesy in 11:5.

But a harmony of those two texts does not come so easily. In addition to Paul's acknowledgement in 11:5 that women may pray and prophesy in church, he says a great deal throughout chapter 14 about the value to the church of prophesying. Then in 14:31, which is very close to the passage under discussion, Paul adds that "all may prophesy (in due time and in proper order, of course), so that all might learn." In other words, there is a teaching aspect to prophesying that is designed to edify the church. In fact, throughout chapter 14, Paul, with almost tiresome repetition states

that prophecy is superior to uninterpreted tongues for the very reason that it teaches and edifies the church whereas tongues do not. Therefore, if the result of prophesying is the spiritual learning and encouragement (μανθάνωσιν. . . παρακαλῶνται, 14:31) of the members, and if that was the kind of prophesying that was allowed to women (11:5), it is difficult to understand why prophecy does not compromise the "subordinate" position of women while speaking in church "authoritatively" does.<sup>6</sup>

It is also important to keep in mind the nature of the the Corinthian worship service. Clearly it was not the august affair that we know so well, with one official standing at one approved podium while all the rest listen respectfully to his ideas. Instead, the service was most informal with several members participating at will (1 Cor 14:26). Paul attempted to bring order out of the chaos, but even he allowed for six to eight speakers (1 Cor 14:27,29) at a given meeting. Such a worship atmosphere accentuates even more Paul's prohibition of women participants. When the worship environment consists of a single speaker before a silent audience, a request for silence is one thing. But when there are numerous speakers, all aware that interruption from the hearers can come at any moment (1 Cor 14:30), the request for some members to never speak is quite stringent. In other words, if women were not to speak even in the kind of informal setting that characterized the early Christian gatherings, then their position was less enviable than some have realized.

In a similar vein, N. J. Hommes<sup>7</sup> shows that the idea of "teacher" or "teaching" in the New Testament churches was quite far removed from the office of minister. Rather he points out that teaching was a mutually interchangeable function among various members of the congregation, and was

thus done by fairly large numbers of members. Accordingly, teaching was not associated with a particular office or elected position in the church, and therefore has only a tenuous connection with the current debate regarding women in certain formal positions in today's church structure.

Grammatically, the passage raises some intriguing questions. The very first phrase, "Just as in all the churches of the saints," sounds a little unusual because Paul several times refers to "all the churches," but never elsewhere does he refer to them as the churches "of the saints." This fact alone is not significant. However, when this phrase is used as the lead in to vs. 34, which the context seems to demand, the redundancy has a very strange ring to it. "Just as in all the churches of the saints, let the women keep silent in the churches."

One suggestion has been to make a distinction between the two phrases, as if Paul is referring to two different groups of churches. Thus, the churches of the saints "refers to churches that had been Jewish-Christian in background, so then Paul is telling the Corinthian believers that just as the women with Jewish roots had always been quietly submissive, so those with Gentile-Christian backgrounds must likewise learn to be quiet. However, this degree of submission goes beyond anything that had existed in Judaism. The variety and extent of women participants in Old Testament history (Deborah, Judges 4,5; Miriam, Ex 15:20-21, Huldah 2 Ki 22:13,14; Esther, etc.), work against the assumption that all Jewish women were silent on religious issues.

Furthermore, such an interpretation would seem to be a retreat from the kind of equality Paul elsewhere spoke of. In Gal 3:27,28 Paul addresses those who have "put on Christ," but have failed to live out in practical ways what their new-found experience in Christ implies -- particularly with regard

to equality. In the previous chapter Paul faulted Peter for acting as though the partition between Jew and Gentile still stood (Gal 2:11-16). In fact, he publicly rebuked Peter, and thus made clear that the principle of Jew-Gentile equality was to be actualized in terms of social practice. But then in 3:28 Paul expands on the concept of equality and includes two other sets of pairs -- slave-free, and male-female, and states that all such designations lose significance for those who are "one in Christ". Incidentally, the terms Paul uses here for male and female are the most generic possible -- they are not the terms he uses when he is referring to a husband-wife relationship. In fact, these are the terms used in the LXX for the creation passage in Gen 1:27. How appropriate that when God created us in His image (Gen 1:27) we were ἀρσεν . . . θήλυ (male and female equals), and when we are baptized into Christ (Gal 3:27), we are once again ἀρσεν . . . θήλυ (male and female equals). Such a movement toward equality seems more in keeping with Paul's emphasis than an interpretation that crystallizes his position at a stage where women could be demeaned.

Yet if the "in-Christ" experience was to mean male-female equality, what does the silencing of the Corinthian women mean if not a radical change in direction? One suggestion is that the Corinthian passage is directed only to married women and thus has to do with wives up-staging their husbands, not whether or not women can teach in public.<sup>8</sup> Such a position is attractive in that it seems to make room for some women participation in church. But deeper questions remain. On the basis of an argument from silence, is it safe to conclude that since widows and single women are not mentioned, they can speak out? Is it likely that single women could freely participate, but once they became engaged or married, any further public discussion of

religious issues would somehow disgrace the husband-to-be? Furthermore, if Paul is intending to be that exclusive, why would he give no instruction at all to the many single women? Still, since the phrase "ask their husbands" is unambiguous, it is clear that wives are intended -- but are they the only ones intended? Is it not more likely that wives here are merely representative of women in general?

Another problem that cries for resolution is the harmony between this injunction to silence and the praying and prophesying allowed to women in 11:5. One suggestion is that the instruction in chapter 11 does not relate to public worship whereas that in chapter 14 does.<sup>9</sup> But although chapter 11 does not specifically refer to worship in the churches, the instruction about veiling and covered heads certainly does not relate easily to activities in the privacy of one's home. F. W. Grosheide refines the argument (but does not clarify it), by suggesting that, although chapter 11 refers to public activities, they were not "the official service of the church."<sup>10</sup> But as is well known, in these early days, the distinction between a Christian meeting in the church and one in the home was not highly developed.<sup>11</sup> It does seem more likely that the instruction in 14:34 was intended to be generic in nature -- women in general were to be quiet -- and any harmony with 11:5 must be sought in some other way.

Another difficulty is knowing why Paul refers to "the law" as the basis of his reasoning. Although there is some uncertainty among expositors about just what "law" is referred to, the vast majority assume that the reference is to the general statement in Gen 3:16 that Eve's desire would be for her husband and he would "rule over" her. But Paul Jewett argues strongly that Paul was too well-acquainted with the Old Testament to "turn a

curse into a commandment."<sup>12</sup> Rather he feels that the statement in Genesis describes what would ensue, it does not prescribe. And he adds that if Eve was to simply acquiesce to this "rule" then man should similarly accept the thorns and thistles that were part of his "rule." It does require a certain jump in logic to conclude that Adam's "rule over" Eve meant that first century Christian women were to be silent in church. A more reasonable view is that the "law" meant women must be silent, only because over the years, rabbinic authority had come to interpret it that way.<sup>13</sup>

The surprising thing is why Paul alludes to the law in this way at all. When he refers to regulations for the churches, his more common injunction for the Corinthians was to refer to his own personal authority ("This is my rule in all the churches" 7:17, also 1:16; 16:1). Instead, "it is left quite indefinite, as if it was an understanding they had known of, but had neglected, "it is not permitted. . . let them be in subjection like the law says." Thus the instruction in 1 Tim 2:12 sounds more typically Pauline, "I do not allow a woman to teach."

The conditional sentence with which vs. 35 begins ("if they desire to learn something", (and they do) adds a certain sharpness to the prohibition, for it indicates that the purpose behind the womens' speaking was not necessarily of dubious motive. The nature of the "if" clause (first class, simple condition) implies that at least some of the women are speaking for the purpose of learning, not for the purpose of interrupting the meeting. Accordingly it is difficult to understand why Paul would use such a strong word (αἰσχρόν, shame) for such speaking. It is the same word he uses in 11:6 for those women whose hair was cut off as a sign of immoral behavior. Either the first part of vs. 35 is misleading in that the women were not



really seeking to learn, or the word "shame" is a bit harsh. Or perhaps there is some other explanation.

Verse 36 contains some additional problems, but also a hint to a possible solution. In many of the expositions of this passage, the importance of the disjunctive conjunction ἢ at the beginning of vs. 36 has not been acknowledged. J. H. Thayer states that it is used before a sentence that stands in contrast to what immediately precedes it.<sup>14</sup> He then gives 1 Cor 14:36 as an example of such use. Similarly, Funk asserts that in interrogative sentences (such as this one) the sense of ἢ is "sharply disjunctive."<sup>15</sup> If that is the sense of the word, then vs. 36 is meant, not so much as a summary of what precedes it, but as a contrast or even a refutation. Gilbert Bilezikian has pointed out that in at least 9 other passages in 1 Corinthians Paul uses this little word to show such contrast that in each case, the translation "nonsense" is perfectly appropriate to express the contrast.<sup>16</sup>

If verse 36 is a contrast or refutation of the preceding, this might also help explain the sudden change in this verse from the 3rd person verbs and pronouns to the 2nd person. Furthermore, there is the intriguing change in gender. Clearly the object of the various injunctions in vss. 34,35 are the women of Corinth, so Paul says "let them . . ." But suddenly in vs. 36 he not only switches to "you," but by using the masculine ὑμᾶς μόνους, he appears to be addressing the men. According to this interpretation, the questions in vs. 36 are very pointedly, even sarcastically directed to the men. "Nonsense! Did the word of God originate with you?! Or do you men think you were the only ones privileged to receive it?!" This idea comports well with one of the background problems of the Corinthian believers. They

not only had a number of aberrant practices (e.g. immorality, litigation, etc.), but they were also quite arrogant (1 Cor 5:2,6). Thus there is a kind of scrappiness among the Corinthians that Paul repeatedly alludes to. So here, the men not only discriminate against women, but do so in a feisty manner, which provokes Paul to a simialr style of reproof.

In this case, the content of vss. 34,35 would represent not the sentiments of Paul but the views and attitudes of the men of Corinth. In other words, vss. 33b-35 comprise a common saying that Paul differs with in vs. 36. Such an abrupt interjection of a quotation is not unlike Paul, especially in Corinthians. In no other letter does he so frequently interrupt his own thoughts with sayings of his hearers, and rarely does he make it clear that that is what he is doing. In 7:1 he alludes to a letter the Corinthians had written to him, presumably inquiring about various issues. It should not be surprising then, that he might refer to some of their "sayings" in his return letter. To strengthen this hypothesis, Neal Flanagan and Edwina Snyder have compiled a list of some 11 quotes, some obvious, some only plausible, that appear to be sayings of the Corinthians that Paul either comments on, or in some cases refutes.<sup>17</sup> According to this view, vs. 33b might be introduced with (As you say)"In all the churches . . . the women should keep silent." Then in vs. 36 Paul addresses the men who had made the rule so strict, and reproves them for it.

Obviously this is a possible interpretation of a difficult passage. Whatever view one takes, some difficulties will remain. As Robertson observes, ". . . we need to be patient with each other as we try to understand Paul's real meaning here."<sup>18</sup> This exposition, while not resolving all the problems, handles a number of them well. For one thing is treats

more seriously the seeming grammatical irregularities of vs. 36, the change in number and gender of the verbs. It also explains the roughness and abruptness with which the passage seems interjected into the context, and makes better sense of the lack of directness in the passive verbs, "they are not permitted," "let them be in subordination". Also, and very importantly, it puts the Paul of this chapter in agreement with the Paul of chapter 11 without having to tortuously re-define "prophesying", "speaking", and "teaching with authority". Also, it does not make Paul stand in opposition to his own statement on equality in Gal 3:28. In fact, seen in this light, a text felt by some to be a mandate for an all-male teaching/preaching ministry, may actually be a corrective of that very idea, and serve as an emphatic statement for female participation not only in worship, but in "the proclamation of the Gospel.

Whatever conclusion is reached, Paul's instruction here and elsewhere must constantly be placed against the backdrop of the gospel commission. That mandate was a very general one. In Acts 1:14 the roster of those present in the earliest Christian gathering included women, and when the Holy Spirit came to empower them and validate their message, it fell upon "all of them" (Acts 2:4). Then when Peter explained what it all meant, he quoted the prophecy of Joel that stresses the all-inclusive nature of the Gospel and of those who would participate in its proclamation -- "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy," and the Spirit will fall on both "menservants and maidservants" (Acts 2:17,18) (Emphasis mine). Any discrimination, so characteristic of the Israel of old must eventually fall.

As time moves toward its climax, Adventists may well play an increasingly prominent political role in world events. Already a number of

high-ranking officials in several world governments (Uganda, Grenada, U.S.A.), are Seventh-day Adventists. In all likelihood, female-run governments like Great Britain and the Philippines (which, according to some interpretations, violate the spirit, if not the letter of Paul's counsel about submissive women,) will multiply, as will opportunities for women participants. Presumably, if certain views prevail, Adventist women could serve in high positions of government, but not in high positions in the church. In light of such developments, if biblical interpreters are perceived as more and more out of touch with the contemporary world, a desperately needed influence will be lost. We may gather our exegetical robes about us and determine never to accommodate an inch toward anything that smacks of cultural relativity, but we may find it to be a lonely endeavor, for we could be perceived as so out of touch with the real world that our own young people do not take us seriously.

The church stands poised before the challenge of the end-time Gospel commission, and it needs both "sons and daughters" to prophesy. Of course the church does not really select those who will proclaim its message, it only acknowledges and puts its stamp of approval on those the Spirit has tapped for service. At least that is the theory behind the ministerial "call" and subsequent ordination. But the growing numbers of female faces in Seminary, and their subsequent road-blocks to service, have helped us realize that between theory and practice is a vexing chasm which our church, and several like it, are struggling to cross. It would appear that a careful interpretation of Paul's positive attitude toward women participants in the Gospel commission might help us bridge the chasm.

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>David W. Odell-Scott, "Let the Women Speak in Church", Biblical Theology Bulletin 13 (1983), p. 90).

<sup>2</sup>E. Earle Ellis, "The Silenced Wives of Corinth," New Testament Textual Criticism, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup>James Moffatt, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939), p.233.

<sup>4</sup>Wayne Grudem, The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians, Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, p. 252.

<sup>5</sup>James Hurley, Men and Women in Biblical Perspective, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup>Samuele Bacchiocchi, Women in the Church, Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1987, p. 167.

<sup>7</sup>N. J. Hommes, "Let Women Be Silent in Church," Calvin Theological Journal 4 (1969), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>N. J. Hommes, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup>W. Harold Mare, 1 Corinthians, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976, p. 277.

<sup>10</sup>F. W. Grosheide, Commentary in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953, p. 342.

<sup>11</sup>G. G. Findlay, 1 Corinthians, The Expositor's Greek Testament, Ed. W. Robertson Nichol, New York: George H. Doran Company, n.d., p. 914.

<sup>12</sup>Paul Jewett, Man as Male and Female (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 114.

<sup>13</sup>Walter Kaiser, "Paul, Women and the Church," Worldwide Challenge, September, 1976, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup>J. H. Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, New York: American Book Company, 1889, p. 275.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Funk, R. Blass and A. Debranner, A Greek Grammar of the New Testament, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 446.

<sup>16</sup>Gilbert Bilezikian, Beyond the Sex Roles, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House 1985, pp. 248,249. The passages listed are 1 Cor 6:1,2; 6:9; 6:16; 6:19; 9:6; 9:8; 9:10; 10:22; 11:13.

<sup>17</sup>Neal M. Flanagan, Edwina Hunter Snyder, "Did Paul Put Down Women in 1 Cor 14:34-36?" Biblical Theology Bulletin 11 (January, 1981), p. 11. The passages are the following: 1:12, an obvious one, "I belong to Paul. . . I belong to Apollos. . ."; 2:15, "The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one" may well be a slogan for a party of elitists who judge themselves so rich in the Spirit that they are impervious to all judgment; 6:12 and 10:23, "All things are lawful," is widely believed by expositors to be a quotation; 6:13, the saying "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food" appears to be a saying to justify selfish actions; 7:1 is debated, but many commentators believe the saying "It is well for a man not to touch a woman," is a saying of the Corinthians that Paul gives several responses to; 8:1, "All of us possess knowledge," may well have been a pet saying that seemed to allow the Corinthians freedom with regard to foods offered to idols. Additional examples may be found in 8:4, 8:8, 11:2 and 15:12.

<sup>18</sup>A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, New York & London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1931, 4:185.