

To Speak or Not to Speak

Essay #4

To speak or not to speak: that is the question. In 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35 the apostle Paul commands women to be silent in the churches and says that it is disgraceful or shameful for a woman to speak in church. At first glance, the command seems straightforward enough, however it appears to contradict Paul's teaching in chapter 11:5 which assumes that women will be praying and prophesying in the assembly and gives instruction as to their head covering while they are engaged in these activities. Who are the women Paul is addressing? What is the nature and the reason for the command?

Abuses in the Assembly

The key verses under scrutiny (v. 34-35) are located toward the end of a large section in 1 Corinthians dealing with abuses that have been occurring within the church. The section begins in chapter 11 where Paul addresses the head covering in conjunction with praying and prophesying. Next, abuses connected with the Lord's Supper are addressed. Chapters 12-14 seem to constitute a single rhetorical unit dealing with spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 is an argument for a unity within the church that will make proper use of the diversity of gifts. Chapter 13, of course, is famous for its emphasis on love as the guiding principle when it comes to using spiritual gifts. Chapter 14 narrows the focus to two particular gifts: prophecy and tongue speaking. Chapter 14 emphasizes intelligibility and building up the church in regard to the use of these gifts. Beginning in v.26, Paul gives specific commands concerning the use of tongues and prophecy. The chapter closes with the bottom line: "Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

It's in this last section that the command about the silence of women is found. All the ancient manuscripts contain verses 34 & 35 and in most cases they are found following verse 33. Some manuscripts locate verse 34 & 35 after verse 40.

Verses 26-40 are concerned with the regulation of verbal abuses in the assembly. Three specific areas are identified: Tongues (v.27), prophecy (v.29) and women (v.34). Paul makes it clear that he is not against speaking in tongues, but he is against speaking in tongues in a disorderly fashion. Similarly, he is not opposed to prophesying in the assembly as long as it is done in an orderly way. Paul commands the tongue speaker to *sigato* (be silent) if no interpreter is present (v.28). He

commands the prophet to sigato (be silent) if a revelation comes to another prophet (v.30). Paul uses this same word in regard to women in verse 34 when he instructs them to sigatosan (be silent) in the churches.

An Occasional Document

It should be remembered that 1 Corinthians is an occasional document. It was written to a specific church in a specific city regarding specific problems they were experiencing. The letter was written as a corrective and not a systematic or exhaustive theology of what is to take place in every church in every part of the world at every period in time. With this in mind, a comment should be made about verse 33b – “as in all the congregations of the saints.” It is unfortunate that many 20th century English translations divide verse 33 into two separate verses. The result is that the second half of verse 33 is made to be the beginning of a sentence continued in verse 34 – I believe erroneously so. This is now the fourth appeal of this kind in this letter (see 4:17; 7:17; 11:16); in each of the other instances this appeal concludes its sentence. In the Greek manuscripts, of course, there are no verse divisions, paragraph divisions, sentence divisions or even word divisions. Often, context is the key in knowing where one thought or sentence ends and another one begins. The phrase “as in all the congregation of the saints” refers to God’s presence as a God of peace and not a God of disorder. This understanding fits well with the overall theme of chapter 14 and the larger unit of chapters 11-14. (However, I don’t see any problem with attaching the meaning to the issue of women keeping silent in all the congregations of the saints – if they are being disorderly. Read on.).

Who Are These Women?

Who are the women Paul is concerned about in this passage? Paul permits women to pray and prophesy in chapter 11 so this command should not be understood as a blanket prohibition on speaking involving all the women in the Corinthian church. It seems that Paul has a particular group of women in mind. Identification of these women is made difficult by the ambiguity of the word gune which may mean either “woman” or “wife.” Verse 35 refers to these women asking questions of their husbands at home. This might seem to imply that hai gunaikes should be understood as “wives” – except that the word for “husbands” (andres) is equally ambiguous and may be understood as either “men” or “husbands!”

Although it is probably not possible to ascertain with absolute certainty, I favor a reading that translates gunaikes as “wives.” One reason for understanding the text this way is that if a woman

did not have any Christian men in her household, then there is no provision made for her for asking questions. Another possible reason for reading “wives” has to do with the exhortation to be in submission (v.34). It’s possible Paul means that all all females are to be subject to males, but since the command to silence is directly tied into *gunaikes* seeking answers to their questions from their *andres* outside the assembly, I believe that “wives” should be the preferred reading.

Perhaps Paul has the wives of the prophets in mind. Perhaps they are interrupting their husbands’ prophecies to ask questions. Perhaps Paul has a wider circle of women in mind who are disrupting the assembly. It seems likely, due in part to Paul’s familiarity with the church and in part to the reports he had received from Corinth, that he had specific women in mind when he included this restriction on speaking.

What Does “Be Silent” Mean?

What exactly is the restriction on speaking and the command to silence? Okay. Here comes the technical stuff – I know, “it’s all Greek to you.” That’s because it *is* all Greek. You remember *sigan* (be silent)? When it is used intransitively (sorry for the grammar lesson) as it is in this passage, it means to “be silent” or to “keep still.” The context determines the specific restrictions on the type of silence. Here, the type of silence is linked to the admonition that these Corinthian *gunaikes* are not permitted to speak (*lalein*), but must be in submission, as the Law says (v. 34). *Lalein* also takes its precise meaning from the context and in this passage it is contrasted (*alla*) with being in submission (*hypotassesthosan*). It seems, then, that the type of speaking that is prohibited is that which is done in an unsubmitive manner. Rather than engage in this type of disruptive speaking the *gunaikes* should keep silent. If the passage is seen in this manner, then the prohibition on speaking is not to be seen as a complete ban on speaking. It is only a ban on speaking that is done in a disorderly way and works against the building up of the church. In this sense, the command to silence fits quite well with the other commands to silence in connection with tongue speakers and prophets. It is only when these activities are done in an unsubmitive way that silence is commanded. This interpretation also explains why Paul says women are allowed to pray and prophesy (Ch.11) as long as they do it in an appropriate way.

Dr. Rick Oster puts it this way, “one ought to remember that all three imperatives for ‘silence’ were in the setting of a correction of aberrant behavior, and therefore the silence desired was only in relationship to the point of abuse.”

In what way was the speech of these women unsubmitive? Various possibilities exist. Since *lalein* is in the present infinitive form (to be speaking), some scholars believe it refers to the action as continuing or being repeated in some way and so the passage should be understood to indicate that these women were “piping up” and asking question after question either of the speaker or of their husbands, creating chaos in the assembly by interfering with communication.

Others believe these women are involved in the evaluation of prophecies and are questioning prophets (perhaps including their own husbands) in an unsubmitive and disrespectful fashion. And Dr. Witherington suggests that these women had brought some of their pagan religious concepts and practices with them into the church. You see, the Oracle at Delphi only prophesied in response to questions. These questions might include matters that were purely personal. It’s possible that these women assumed Christian prophets functioned in the same way. Some commentators believe that the men and the women sat segregated and that some of the women were calling from one side to the other.

Conclusion

The command for women to be silent is the third command to be silent in a series of three imperatives. The first two commands are directed to tongue speakers and prophets. The third is addressed to (certain) women. Paul is not opposed to speaking in tongues, prophesying or women speaking in church. Paul condemns the abuse of speaking in tongues, prophesying and women speaking in the assembly. The scene in the Corinthian church is one of chaos and disorder and Paul is attempting to correct that situation.

It appears that the nature of the disruptive speech by the women has to do with the asking of questions in a way that communicates disrespect and/or demonstrates an unsubmitive attitude. It is likely that they were questioning the prophecies. It may even be that these women were the wives of the prophets. Paul informs them that they are acting in a disgraceful manner contrary to the law of submission and that they should refrain from speaking in the assembly. It is likely that Paul has specific women in mind.

In short, Paul was asking some particular women in one particular church to stop asking questions in a disruptive manner. The same principle would apply to all women in all the churches (and to men as well!). Were all tongue speakers in all churches abusing their verbal rights in the assembly? Probably not. Were all prophets in all churches abusing their verbal rights in the assembly? Probably

not. Were all women in all churches abusing their verbal rights in the assembly? Probably not. Paul was writing to a specific situation in Corinth that needed correction because it was getting in the way of the big picture. Does the same principle apply to us today? Probably so. The assembly should be conducted in a way that is not disruptive and that contributes to the spiritual growth of others and the glory of God. I believe that women may participate vocally in the assembly as long as the headship principle is honored and they are not disruptive in their participation.

Okay. Talk about a nutshell! That's about the most condensed commentary on that passage that I have ever done. I hope it provokes thought and drives you to the Word and to prayer. The next essay will examine 1 Timothy 2:11-12 – "I do not permit a woman to speak . . ."

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