

An Exegetical Study Of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36

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This section of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is printed as a separate paragraph in the UBS text of the Greek NT.

The paragraph begins in the middle of verse 33 with the words, "*hos en pasais tais ekklesiiais ton hagion.*" Editors are not at all sure whether these words belong to verse 33 or to verse 34. Because there is in neither the preceding nor the following clause a "*houtos*" corresponding to the "*hos*" with which this clause begins, it is impossible to make a final decision on this question on the basis of grammar.

Commentators who favor the punctuation adopted by the UBS text are inclined to insist that these words make no sense if they are attached to the first half of verse 33. They argue that it is superfluous to say that God is not a God of disorder but of peace as in all the churches of the saints. This argument certainly carries a great deal of weight, especially if the sentence is divorced from its context.

If we, however, remember that the congregation in Corinth was Paul's *Sorgekind* and that almost every chapter in this letter had dealt with disorder of some kind, the kind of disorder that we meet in no other congregation addressed by Paul, it would not be out of place for Paul to contrast the disorder in Corinth with the more orderly procedures followed by other congregations. In that context it would no longer seem totally out of place for the apostles to say that God is not a God of disorder but of peace (also in Corinth) as (He is) in all the churches of the saints.

If, on the other hand this clause is treated as part of the following sentence, as an introduction to the command, "*hai gynaiques en tais ekklesiiais sigatosan,*" a certain awkwardness results. Would we then not expect that either *hai gynaiques* or *tais ekklesiiais* would be modified by "*hymon?*" Or would it not appear to be sufficient to say, "*hos en pasais tais ekklesiiais, ton hagion, hai gynaiques sigatosan?*" The repetition of *en tais ekklesiiais* seems to be redundant, which would not be the case if the *hos* clause were taken as part of the preceding sentence, a construction which, as we have seen, is grammatically and contextually possible.

After that word of caution we are perfectly willing to let the punctuation of the UBS text stand, for it will have little or no effect on the meaning of the passage, or on the conclusions to which this passage leads us.

When Paul says, "*hai gynaiques en tais ekklesiiais sigatosan*" we do well to remember that *sigatosan* is a word with a very definite and restricted meaning. *Sige* is a much more restrictive word than its synonym which Paul uses in discussing the role of women in 1 Timothy, *hesychia*. When Paul says there that the woman should be in *hesychia*, this does not necessarily mean that she should be silent and say nothing. *Hesychia*, while it can mean silence, is more often used in the sense of quietness, calmness, rest, and peace. There can be no doubt, however, that when Paul says, "*Sigatosan,*" he is directing the women not to speak in the church.

If there were any doubt on that point, it would immediately be removed by what Paul says right after giving this command, namely, "*ou gar epitrepetai autais lalein.*" With *gar* he indicates that he is giving the reason for the command to be silent, namely, "*They are not allowed to speak.*" *Lalein* means to speak or even to utter sounds. If it were to be interpreted absolutely it would mean that women are to maintain complete and total silence.

The context makes it clear, first of all, that this command must be applied only *en tais ekklesiiais*, a phrase which must be supplied from the preceding clause and is echoed in the *en ekklesia* of verse 35. Women, according to this command, are to maintain silence in the church. For the sake of clarity it might be noted that the word "church" in the NT is never the designation of a building of wood or stone. It is either a collective name by which all those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior are viewed as being united in one flock under one Shepherd, in which case the word is never used in the plural or else as a designation for smaller groupings of confessing Christians in one place. If it is so understood here, then Paul's command, understood in strict literal fashion, would mean that a woman loses her right to speak on the day she becomes a converted Christian and thus comes to be in *the* church or in *a* church.

There is another use of the word church which places more limitations on Paul's command. *Ekklesia* is also used to denote a gathering of believers for a worship service. This last definition is most assuredly the one Paul has in mind here. His words therefore forbid women to speak or to utter sounds in the church service. It is thus clear that the words, "They are not allowed to speak" is not an absolute prohibition to speak, but only a command to be silent under certain circumstances, namely, "in a church," or "in a worship assembly." Strictly and literally interpreted this would mean that they are not to join in reciting the confession of faith or the prayers nor in the singing of the hymns, unless, like Hannah of old, they would do this only by moving their lips.

A rule of Bible interpretation laid down by Martin Luther which needs to be used with a great deal of awe-full caution and which he himself used very sparingly was that every single word of Scripture should be interpreted in its strict native sense unless manifest absurdity would result. Such manifest absurdity never gives us a right to reject what has been said. And in reading Paul's words here we dare never forget, as he himself reminds us after having written these words about women being silent in the worship service, that as an inspired apostle his commands are the commandments of the Lord. Nevertheless such manifest absurdity should drive us deeper into the Word of God to discover what the Holy Spirit had in mind.

When Luther laid down this hermeneutical rule he most certainly did not intend that we should allow sinful human reason to determine what is a manifest absurdity. Against such a blasphemous practice he warns men often enough. The devil's harlot is never to be accorded such honor and respect. No, Scripture itself must teach us what a manifest absurdity is.

It would surely be a manifest absurdity to interpret Paul's words to mean that women are never to utter any sounds in the church service under any and all conditions. That manifest absurdity follows from everything that the Bible says about the honored place that women hold in the Savior's kingdom as heirs together with men of the grace of life. Should they be altogether silent while the praises of the Lord are being sung or when the faith is being confessed, when out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks? He who defended the loud speaking of the little children in the temple and saw in their songs of praise a fulfillment of OT prophecy surely would also say that if the women who believe in Him were altogether silent, the very stones would cry out.

The manifest absurdity involved in the view that the command to be silent is an absolute command that applies under any and all conditions in the church service is also seen when we compare what Paul says here with what he had written in chapter eleven of this same book. There he had spoken of women prophesying and praying, and the context there would seem to indicate that Paul was discussing disorders in the public worship of the Corinthian congregation.

Some commentators are so sure that there is an insoluble contradiction between chapter eleven and this passage that they look upon verses 34 and 35 as an interpolation by which the text was corrupted. While there is no textual evidence that would in anyway justify the omission of these words in order to solve the difficulty by removing it, yet it should be pointed out that in a few not very reliable manuscripts these verses are transposed to follow verse 40. (This would, of course, force us to construe the words, "*hos en pasais ekklesiiais ton hagion*" with verse 33a.) This solution of the problem must be rejected.

Wendland, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, solves the difficulty by maintaining that in chapter 11 Paul is not speaking about prophesying and praying in the church service but only of such activities carried on by women in private or in the family circle. While it is true that there is nothing in the first verses of chapter eleven that proves beyond question that Paul is discussing (in the context of public worship) the question of male authority, yet there is also nothing there that in any way indicates that Wendland's assumption is correct. There can be no doubt that in the remaining part of chapter eleven Paul discusses disorders in public worship, particularly in the celebration of the blessed sacrament. What he says about idolatry in chapter ten surely can also be viewed as part of Paul's instruction regarding the Worship life of the Corinthian believers. It would therefore only be natural to assume that also the first part of chapter eleven deals with disorderly conduct in public worship. Pointing to that same conclusion is the fact that the custom to which Paul refers is one that had to do with the public behavior of women, who were not expected to wear a veil in the privacy of the home.

Wendland's solution, therefore, does not seem to be tenable, and we are compelled to seek for some other way to reconcile what Paul says here with what he had written only three chapters earlier. It really makes no difference whether the praying and prophesying referred to in the chapter is joint or individual activity. In either case such activity would seem to be in conflict with the command of Paul which says emphatically that women are to be silent. They are not allowed to *lalein*, to utter any sounds. Those words, taken at face value, without consideration of the context, would in reality forbid women to join even in joint praying and prophesying, at least in the church service. That Paul should forbid even this seems inconceivable. It appears to be the kind of "manifest absurdity" that Luther had in mind.

Does the context here provide us with any clues that will keep us from being forced to adopt Wendland's solution?

By way of contrast to the statement that women are not allowed to speak in the worship assembly, Paul continues, "*Alla hypotassesthosan*," "Let them be in subjection," and adds, "*kathos kai ho nomos legei*," "as also the law says." The *alla* makes it clear that this statement is still part of the reason for which women are ordered to be silent. In fact we are given here the basic reason for the ordered silence on their part. The law says that they are to be in subjection.

It is true that there is no specific and express command in the law, the OT Torah, no express and specific *entole*, which orders women to be subject. The closest we come to such a command is the word spoken to Eve, after the fall which made her subject to a sinful husband, and many commentators immediately assume that Paul must have that word of God in mind. But the law, the Torah, is more than the sum total of all specific *entolai* given by God in the OT. The law includes also the story of creation and all that is said there to reveal to us what the holy, immutable will of God in regard to human behavior.

It is difficult to see how Paul could have had Genesis 3:16 in mind. The article with *hai gynaikeis* is generic, and distinguishes the women as a class from all other groups in the *congregation*. If Paul had wanted to limit his directive to the married Women in the congregation. If Paul had wanted to limit his directive to the married women in the congregation he could have used a different word that would have made this crystal clear. It is true that the Koine text and a few scattered manuscripts have the possessive pronoun *hymon* modifying *gynaikeis*, but even that does not justify the translation, "Let your wives be silent in the churches." There is nothing in this context that would indicate that Paul is addressing the members of the congregation as husbands here. He is addressing the whole congregation and even if we were to adopt the *hymon* as a genuine part of the inspired text all that it would enable us to say with certainty is that he is speaking of the women who belong to the congregation.

The conclusion that these women are wives is said to be called for by the phrase *tous idious andras* in verse 35. It is argued that these words must be translated "their own husbands." But while this is possible the translation "their own men" is not definitively excluded. And even if it were, it would still not prove that the women of verse 34 are all wives. It would only mean that some of these women would have to have their desire to learn satisfied in some other way. They might, for example, ask some of their women friends to get the desired information from their husbands.

It might be of some interest to note at this point that the Strack-Billerbeck *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* says that women were not on principle forbidden to speak in the synagog services, but that for all practical purposes it was not allowed. A woman might be asked, as a mark of honor, to read one of the Scripture lessons, but modesty would require that she decline (S-B, 111, 467).

While that remark does not solve the difficulty we face here, it does call our attention to this that Paul very clearly views his command to the women to maintain silence as an application of the legal principle that women are to be in subjection.

If we then look for a speaking activity in the context which might violate that legal principle—we will not need to look very far. In spite of the UBS text chapter division, it becomes very clear that there is a very close connection between verses 29-33 and the following verses. The *lalein* of verse 34 and 35 clearly echoes the

laleitosan of verse 29, the *sigatosan* of verse 34, the *sigato* of verse 30, and the *mathein* of verse 35 the *manthanosin* of verse 31.

In those preceding verses Paul had discussed the (charismatic?) activity, of prophesying, the proclamation of revelations that had come directly from God in the course of the worship service. In the connection he wrote, "Let two or three prophets speak, *laleitosan*, and let the others judge. If a revelation comes to another who is seated, let the first. (prophet to speak) be silent, *sigato*. For you can all prophesy, one at a time, in order that all may learn, *manthanosin*, and that all may be comforted." It is significant also that he says that God is not a God of disorder, *akatastasias* (v.33a).

In that connection it should not be difficult to see what kind of silence Paul is imposing on women as a class in the congregation, if we keep in mind that the apostle himself makes clear that the legal principle he is applying is not that women are to keep silent but rather that women are to be in subjection, "as the law says."

There are especially two activities referred to in this context that involve speaking, the one is prophesying, one by one (that is, not jointly, but singly) and the other is judging the prophesying. If a man is standing to deliver a prophecy, a revelation, and a woman would insist that she has received a revelation which she wanted to proclaim, the rule that Paul had just laid down would mean that her rising to speak would in effect be a command to the man who was speaking to be silent (*sigato*). That sort of speaking would very clearly conflict with the subordinate position of women in the order of creation, which calls upon them to be in subjection. Therefore, in that situation, they must be silent (*sigatosan*). It should not be difficult for her to contain herself, since the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, whether they are male or female.

Paul had likewise written that two or three prophets were to prophesy in one service and the other members of the congregation were then to judge. He evidently expected that this judging should be done for the edification and instruction of the congregation. This means that this judging would not be silent but would involve speaking the considered judgment out loud in the hearing of the congregation. If a woman in that situation were to pronounce a judgment on a male prophet, this again would put her in a position where she would violate the legal principle, "Let them be in subjection." In this activity of judging, therefore, the women were also not to participate by speaking but "to keep silence in the churches."

Paul refers to another type of speaking which is also forbidden to women in the church. He says, "*ei de ti mathein thelousin, en oiko tous idiou andras eperotatosan*," "if they want to learn something, let them ask their own men at home. In contrast to the two previous examples, it is a little more difficult to see how the desire to learn could violate the principle that women should be subject to men. However, every teacher knows that there is a way of questioning that can easily give evidence of a rebellious and undisciplined attitude. The questioning can easily become judgmental and this application of the basic principle involved might be viewed as an application to an aspect of the activity which, Paul had called for when he said, "Let the others judge."

At the same time Paul wishes to safeguard the woman's right to learn, in accord with his earlier statement that the purpose of (charismatic?) prophesying was that "all might learn." This right was to be safeguarded just as much as the principle that women are to be subject to men. They are therefore directed, if they wish to know more about the matters that had been the subject of the prophesying, to ask *en oiko tous idiou andras*. As we have already noted the translation, "their own husbands," may be too restrictive, even though the possessive pronoun would be an argument in favor of that translation. While it may be preferable to translate instead, "their own men," the decision on that point is not crucial, for these are, as we have seen, other alternatives available for the unmarried if Paul in this case had in mind only those women who had living husbands.

Paul summarizes his whole discussion of the question of woman's role in the church service with the words "*aischron gar estin gynaiki lalein en ekklesia*," "it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." Torn out of context these words again seem on the surface to lay down a universal principle requiring total silence on the part of women in church which, however, would, as we have already pointed out, result in a "manifest absurdity" and would make Paul contradict himself.

Earlier in the context Paul had pointed out that the reason why women were not to speak in the church under the conditions that he was discussing was that the law requires women to be in subjection. Whatever is in conflict with God's law ought to be shameful in the eyes of God's people. Whenever the speaking of a woman gives evidence of a lack of awe and respect for the holy and immutable will of God in regard to human behavior, the sensibilities and consciences of God's people are wounded. Such awe and respect for the will of God ought to be especially manifest "in church," when God's people gather to hear His Word and to sing His praises.

The men in Corinth, who had been willing to tolerate incestuous behavior on the part of one of their own, seem to have found nothing shameful in female behavior that subverted the divine order. Paul therefore asks in conclusion, "*E aph' hymon ho logos tou theou exelthen, e eis hymas monous katentesen?*"

The emphatic position of *aph' hymon* at the beginning of the sentence was a forceful reminder to the Corinthian Christians that they were not to act without consideration for their fellow Christians, and that they had no right to depart from customs which undergirded divinely ordained principles. He had told them that God is a God of order. He had reminded them that the principles according to which he expected them to order their lives had been laid down in God's law and that they were principles by which all the churches of the saints were to be guided.

It was the Word of God that laid down the principle that women are to be in subjection. Women were to demonstrate their willingness to be obedient to God's Word in this matter particularly by their conduct in church. The men, too, were to display that same willingness by their conduct. If the masculine form of *monous* does not prove that these words are directed *only* to them, it certainly shows that it is directed *also* to them.

This Word of God had not come *from* them; it had come *to* them. They had not originated it and therefore it was not theirs either to change or to ignore. Moreover, it had not come to them alone. By condoning what God does not allow, they were not only guilty of ignoring the Word of God but also endangering the fellowship and unity which ought to exist between them and all the other churches of the saints.

Paul's manner of dealing with the situation in Corinth is a valid guide for us today. The social and cultural conditions that we must deal with may not be the same as those under which Paul had to apply the directives of God's Word. But divine principles do not change. One of those principles, laid down in God's law according to the inspired apostle, is that women are to be in subjection to men. That principle we can expect and should expect always to be taken into consideration with utmost seriousness by all those who wish to be known as God's people. Any conduct or any custom by which that principle is set aside is to be viewed as a shameful thing by all those for whom the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures are the only source and norm by which all teachers and all teachings, as well as all conduct, are to be judged.