
LET THE WOMEN SPEAK IN CHURCH

An Egalitarian Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b-36

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The Problem

Since the status of women in the authentic Pauline texts (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) became an issue for critical study, considerable attention has been paid to those particular passages which appear to be inconsistent with Paul's egalitarian spirit. It has been argued in many quarters that the traditional interpretations of Paul as one who demeans the status of women is mistaken. This point has been discussed by critical scholars at considerable length. Their conclusions seem fairly clear. Paul was a man who accepted women as equal partners in preaching, teaching, and prophesying, and this acceptance of women was congruent with all aspects of his religious-theological enterprise. We will not rehearse the arguments for the above assessments but will assume their validity for the sake of discussion.

It has been alleged by many that the most blatantly sexist passage in the authentic letters is 1 Cor 14:33b-36. Considerable energy has been spent in an on-going debate of the authorship, the intent and the relation of 14:33b-36 to other Pauline texts. Roughly, three major interpretations exist. The most commonly held interpretation uncritically overlooks all discrepancies between the text and other passages on the subject. Women are to be silent in church (Grosheide: 341).

The second interpretation concludes that given Paul's egalitarian spirit as demonstrated in his letters and/or the Acts of the Apostles, the prohibition against female participation in the worship services of Corinth is an interpolation (Schweizer: 400; Conselmann: 246; Barrett; Murphy-O'Connor: 133).

The third finds room for the prohibition by elaborate schemes which attempt to reconcile the text with the body of Pauline literature. Thus, while 1 Cor 14:33b-36 possesses certain difficulties in the corpus, it is judged to be an authentic Pauline work (Bruce: 135 & 136; Thrall: 102; Orr & Walther: 311-315; Walter: 153-155; Holladay: 188-190).

Despite their differences with respect to the authorship and their evaluation of how the text relates to other Pauline passages, all three interpretations assume a common understanding of the text. The thrust of the text is assumed to be that "women are to be silent in the churches." It is upon this assumed content that scholars

base their charge of corruption or seek to elaborate in what sense women are to be silent in the churches.

In the interpretation to follow, I will demonstrate that 1 Cor 14:33b-36 is neither inconsistent with nor possesses a problem for the status of women as presented in the Pauline corpus. The text does not admonish anyone for allowing women to speak in church. In fact, the text is one of the most emphatic statements for female participation in the worship of the church to be found in the New Testament.

An Alternative Interpretation

THE PARTICLE ϵ

We will be ushered into the heart of the interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b-36 by focusing upon the Greek term ϵ which introduces v. 36. Traditionally, this term is marked with a grave accent, thus confirming it to be a particle. Denniston points out that particles contribute to the *force* and *vividness* of a text in ways which are best understood as inflexions of the voice in speaking, or by italics, exclamation marks, etc., on the page. He goes on to suggest that "the particles may be compared to marks of expression in a musical score which suggest interpretation rather than dictate it" (Denniston: xxxviii-xxxix). In this way, the particles serve to indicate moods of emotion, nuances, irony or sarcasm.

The particle ϵ serves to establish a disjunctive or comparative conjunction between separate ideas or convictions (Arndt & Gingrich: 342-343; Liddell & Scott: l.761; Smyth: 2856; A. T. Robertson: 1188). This particle is capable of conveying a spectrum of *negative* conjunctions ranging from the simple noting of a difference by comparison to the refutation of one thing by another. The intensity of the disjunctive which any particular ϵ conveys is dependent upon its context. Funk points out that the particle ϵ displays its sharpest disjunctive characteristics in interrogative sentences (446). In such instances, the particle declares that if one phrase is the case then the other is not. Smyth points out that "an ϵ often introduces an argument *ex contrario*" (2861). Thayer made the same point when he asserted that an ϵ may appear "before a sentence contrary to the one just preceding, to indicate that if one be denied or refuted the other must stand" (275). Interestingly, one of Thayer's examples of the ϵ functioning in such a manner was 1 Cor 14:36!

Unfortunately, Thayer failed to note the full ramifications of his discovery given the content of the passage.

The common reading of the text fails to take into account the power and intent of the particle ϵ when it introduces an interrogative sentence. Traditionally, v. 36 is understood to be the summation of vv. 33b-35, asserting their truth and delivering the final blow against female participation in worship. Thus, v. 36 is wrongly interpreted to say, "Truly! Did the word of God originate with you or are you the only ones it has reached?"

The particle which introduces the interrogative sentence of 14:36 indicates that the rhetorical questions to follow will serve to refute the sentences which preceded it. It is my contention that the ϵ which introduces 1 Cor 14:36 declares that vv. 33b-35 are to be *emphatically* refuted by the two-fold rhetorical query of v. 36. The complete passage (vv. 33b-36) is not an internally unified, straightforward argument or condemnation of women who participate in the worship of the church. The silencing of women in the name of conformity to tradition and law is neither the last word nor the purpose of the text. The silencing of women in church is to be questioned, refuted and overcome by the two-fold negative rhetorical query of v. 36.

1 Cor 14:33b-36 is not the only passage in First Corinthians where Paul employs the particle ϵ to introduce a rhetorical query which serves to deny or refute the passages preceding it. 1 Cor 11:20-22 is structurally identical.

²⁰When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. ²²What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

The state of affairs at Corinth is represented in vv. 20-21. These verses are followed by the particle ϵ which introduces a rhetorical line of query whose purpose is to refute vv. 20-21 and to admonish those who humiliate the poor with their insensitive consumption. There has been no debate that I can find regarding the grammatical structure of 11:20-22. The particle ϵ serves its dramatic function without incident or confusion.

To read v. 22 as the summation of vv. 20-21 would be absurd. Such a translation of the ϵ as an adverb would produce innumerable interpretative problems which might result in the construction of elaborate schemes to reconcile the text to the Pauline corpus or even the assessment that the text is a corruption. Yet, such a translation has never been proposed. And why? Because to so construe the passage would only reap havoc in relation to the larger text of First Corinthians and the Pauline corpus. However, this is precisely what has occurred with respect to 14:33b-36.

The Audience

The full power and justification of the egalitarian interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b-36 will be disclosed when we consider "To whom the text is addressed." Traditional interpreters, assuming that the purpose of the passage is to admonish the women of Corinth for speaking in church, have concluded that vv. 33b-36 are addressed to the women. "Did the word of God originate with you *women* or are you *women* the only ones it has reached?" This interpretation is unsatisfactory on two accounts. First, it assumes that v. 36 is the summation of vv. 33b-35. This point we have already discussed. Second, while the pronouns in the verse are ambiguous with respect to their gender (*humōn, humas*), the latter in v. 36b is modified by the plural *masculine* adjective *monous* (alone). This modification serves to denote that the gender of the second person plural pronouns of v. 36 is *masculine*, and *not feminine* as is commonly assumed. We are, therefore, to conclude that 14:33b-36 is not addressed *exclusively* to the women of Corinth.

At this point, a crucial decision is before us. Are we to translate the masculine modified pronouns as denoting *male persons* or *people* in a gender inclusive sense?

Up until this time, those observant and critical scholars who have noted the masculine modification of the pronouns of v. 36 have concluded that the text is addressed to the "whole church at Corinth" (Bruce; Orr & Walther). The masculine modified pronouns of v. 36 are assumed to be gender inclusive. Both the men and the women of Corinth are responsible for the deviation from the common practice of women remaining silent in the churches. By granting equal status to men and women in the ritual of the cult, the church has chosen to traverse from the acceptable norms of practice ("As in all the churches of the Saints") and to forsake the law. The purpose of the two-fold query (v. 36) is to reveal to the entire congregation that their actions are based on self righteous assumptions which are disrespectful of the tradition and the greater community of believers.

Like all the previous interpretations offered of 14:33b-36 up to this time, the gender inclusive proposal mistakenly assumes that v. 36 is the *summation* of vv. 33b-35. This interpretation fails to take seriously the complete text of 14:33b-36 in that it overlooks the power and disjunctive character of a particle ϵ when it introduces an interrogative sentence.

If the text is addressed to the whole congregation, admonishing all the people for their deviation from the tradition, the law and the larger Christian community in letting women speak in church, then we must conclude that the gender inclusive interpretation fails to offer any new evidence for resolving the alleged inconsistency of 14:33b-36 with the Pauline corpus. Thus, the gender inclusive interpretation must accept the judgment that

14:33b-36 is an interpolation or room must be found for the text by elaborate schemes which reconcile the text with the body of authentic epistles.

The contention that these masculine modified pronouns denote "common gender" is mistaken. I propose that we assume that the masculine modified pronouns of v. 36 do in fact denote male persons. That is, the gender designation of *monous* does in fact declare "to whom 14:33b-36 is addressed."

In rereading the text, we sense that Paul is *not* speaking to the women of Corinth. While the style of writing in the third person is a common Pauline practice, it seems clear given v. 36b that vv. 33b-35 are *about* the women addressed to the men. "For *they* are not permitted to speak. . . If there is anything *they* desire to know, let *them* ask *their* husbands at home."

However, with v. 36, we are faced with a dramatic shift of emphasis. The address is no longer *about* the women. Beginning with the $\bar{\epsilon}$ which introduces v. 36, Paul speaks directly to his audience, *the men of Corinth*. "What! Did the word of God originate with you or are you (men) the only ones it has reached?" The inquiry of v. 36 is a refutation of the self-righteous assumptions of the men voiced in vv. 33b-35. It is with v. 36 that the status and full intent of the remarks made to the men about the women are revealed. Vv. 33b-35 give voice to the sexist opinions of the male believers in the Corinthian church. The men believe that they were the mediators of the faith. By virtue of being born male, the word of God originated with them.

No sooner does Paul echo the assumptions of the men of Corinth than he refutes them. What first appeared to be remarks praising the status of men by condemning the women, in the end admonishes the men for their self-righteousness and inconsistency.

If we assume that Paul's opponents in Corinth are the Judaizers, the Legalist, the thrust of the text as I interpret it seems all the more clear. Verses 33b-35 are the representation of the Legalists' position on female participation in worship. Paul is re-stating the thesis of his opponents or his understanding of certain happenings which are occurring in the Corinthian church. However, even Paul's restatement must be read with an ear for tone. The phrase, "even as the law says," hints at the context and something of the purpose of the entire text. The issue of female participation or non-participation in the worship service of the Corinthian congregation occurs in the larger debate on the status of the law in the Gentile-Christian communities. "As even the law says" may be a cue to the Gentile reading or hearing the text that all is not right with a perspective which is justifiable according to the Jewish law.

For the Gentile men of Corinth, an appeal to the law regarding the status of women in congregational worship opens the door to all the restrictions and ritual which men are required to accomplish *as even the law says*. This

may be a subtle allusion to the painful ritual which men are required to fulfill according to the law. This use of the law is a reminder to the Gentile men of Corinth that they are free of the law and are, therefore, not required to be circumcised (1 Cor 7:18-19). But, if the women are to be women according to the law, then are not all the men also to be men according to the law? The silencing of the women in worship vindicated by an appeal to the law is linked very subtly to the circumcising of the males. If one is to be observed, then also the other, as even the law says.

By his use of the negative rhetorical style of questioning, Paul not only expresses his opinion but serves to draw a major difference between the Judaizers and the Gentiles. The male Gentile-Christians, being converts to the faith, know that the word of God did not originate with themselves. It was brought to them by Paul and other believers. They also know that they are not the only ones to receive the word of God. The women of their church have also received the word. And Paul's travels have served to spread the word into Asia and Europe. The Gentile-Christian men of Corinth know that they are not the sole proprietors of the faith. However, Paul's opponents, the judaizing-Christians do assume that the word of God did in fact originate with them. Yes! We are the only ones to truly receive the word.

Paul's audience in vv. 33b-36 is the men of the Corinthian church whom he divides by the two-fold negative query of v. 36. Those who answer "no" in agreement with Paul must reject the exclusion of female participation in worship by reason of an appeal to custom or the law. However, those who answer "yes" will stand not only against Paul, but apart from the non-Legalistic believers of the Corinthian church.

Conclusion

Up until now we have read Paul from the wrong perspective. Traditional interpreters, assuming a male dominated hermeneutic with respect to scripture, tradition and church polity, were incapable of hearing the text in any other voice. Having successfully passed over the most obvious allusions to and statements for the equality of men and women in the worship of the church, the traditional interpreters heard in 1 Cor 14:33b-36 what they expected to hear and nothing more. However, the old hermeneutic was found to be lacking. As more critical attention was paid to the text and a stronger feminine voice emerged within the churches, there arose a considerable conflict of interpretation. The text held within it more than the traditional interpretation could hope to encompass. Two general interpretations emerged to resolve the problem generated by the critical study of Paul, but these solutions, I have argued, fail by means of a common grammatical error.

In returning to the text once again, we will hear with surprising clarity the interpretation I have explicated above.

^{33b}As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as *even the law says*. ³⁵If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. [Pause] ³⁶WHAT! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you (men) the only ones it has reached?

The immediate value of this interpretation is evident. By being true to the grammar of the text, my interpretation reveals that the content of 14:33b-36 is consistent with Paul's evaluation of women in the rest of First Corinthians and the corpus of authentic Pauline works. Thus, the reasons put forward for declaring 14:33b-36 to be a corruption are invalidated. The text is an authentic Pauline passage, consistent with his written work and the Acts account of his life and ministry. The irony of all this is that the very scripture which has for centuries been interpreted as silencing female participation in the worship of the churches, may now be understood as declaring their equality.

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