

Studies in 1 Corinthians

Lesson XXXVIII: Women in the Church, Yesterday and Today

Text: 1 Corinthians 14:6-19

33 For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints,^[a]
34 women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. **35** If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.^{[b][c]}

36 Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?
37 If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. **38** If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.^[d]
39 Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.
40 But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

NOTES

a. The phrase “*as in all the congregations of the saints*” could instead be joined to the end of the sentence in verse 33. This is the way it appears in the KJV, NASV, and NLT. There is no punctuation in the Greek.

b. In the majority of ancient New Testament manuscripts, verses 34-35 appear after verse 33; however, roughly half of a group of manuscripts classed as the Western witnesses place these verses after verse 40 (at the end of the chapter), leading some to conjecture that they were added later.

c. Greek: “*The women in the out-calleds let-be-hushing not for a is being permitted to them to-be-talking but let-them-be-being-under-set according as and the law is-saying*” <http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/NTpdf/1co14.pdf>

d. Some manuscripts read: “*If he is ignorant of this, let him be ignorant*”

Introduction

This study is focused primarily on Paul’s instructions to women in the Corinthians situation. For further insight into the various teachings on women in the New Testament, read: Acts 10:34, 21:9; Romans 2:11, 16:1-15; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 5:21-33, 6:9; Philippians 4:2-3; 1 Timothy 2:9-15, 3:1-13; Titus 2:3-5; and 1 Peter 3:1-8.

Discussion Questions

1. In verses 33-35, the writer turns his attention from the exercise of tongues and prophecy to the behavior of the women in the church at Corinth. What is Paul’s overarching purpose for these particular instructions? (vs. 40; cf. vv 26-33).
2. In 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul permitted the women of the Corinthian congregation to speak (pray and prophecy), provided they were wearing head coverings. In Chapter 14:34-35, Paul says women are to be silent in the church and ask questions of their husbands at home. Does this present a contradiction? How do we reconcile the two passages?

“The reason for this prohibition reflects contemporary educational practice. Except for girls from rich families, who could afford private tutors to educate their daughters, girls were not educated in Jewish or Roman society. They learned by asking their parents and brothers. What Paul is saying in chapter 14 then is that women not versed in Christian truth should not interrupt the worship service to ask questions which their husbands could teach them. In other words, women...should not use their equality as an occasion for denying others the opportunity for worship by interrupting the service with questions...”

“Paul accomplishes two things by this word. First, he reduces the chaos which threatens to engulf the public assemblies of the church of Corinth. And, second, he again strengthens the family unit in the context of concern for the public life of the church. He gives the family something substantive to discuss at home. Such an exhortation itself is innovative since ancient men were frequently commanded to discuss only matters of domesticity with their wives. In contrast, Paul suggests husbands and wives together should ‘discern’ the prophetic word at home.”ⁱ

3. Most commentators agree that Paul is referring to the Law of Moses in verse 34. Why does he see the need to bolster his case with an appeal to the Law, especially in light of his other writings (“You are not under the law, but under grace,” Rom. 6:14; “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse,” Gal. 3:10)?
4. If women were to remain *completely* silent in the churches of Christ, then that would hinder them from worshipping and exercising their spiritual gifts, which is the duty of all believers. Therefore, this passage must mean that women were to remain silent in what regard?

One woman describes her experience belonging to a religious group which applied this passage in a very “wooden” literal sense: *“I asked [minister] if the women of the church could meet together after the service to discuss the practicalities of the sermon and how it related directly to us. [His] terse answer was, ‘That would not be biblical. Women are to be silent in the church’... I’ve had several occasions where I wished I could introduce visitors who were friends or family. When my mom came to visit once, and my husband was out of town on business, another man tried to introduce her to the congregation, except that he didn’t know who she was. He couldn’t ask her, because women are to be silent in the church. Flustered, he finally introduced her as ‘Jen’s mother’....Prayer requests are also a time for women to be silent in [name omitted]. The men give all the prayer requests. If my husband wasn’t there, my son could give it, even though he wasn’t old enough to take communion. If you don’t have a husband or a son there, you can write it out and give it to another man to read to the whole congregation. After a few attempts at that, I finally just gave up and would tell my friends about my prayer request privately. It wasn’t worth the humiliation. So, women being silent in the church at [name omitted] includes not being able to introduce your own guests, not being able to ask for prayer yourself, not being able to have a discussion after the service, and not being able to make announcements – unless your name is [minister’s wife].”ⁱⁱ*

Conclusion:

To arrive at the proper interpretation of tough passages like this, we need to have an appreciation for how the New Testament is structured: through commands, principles, examples, and traditions (which include the practical application of principles to specific situations and cultural contexts).

Footnotes

ⁱ Excerpted from “The Role of Women in the Church: The Pauline Perspective by John E. Toews. Accessed online at <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?341>

ⁱⁱ Excerpted from the blog “Jen’s Gems.” Accessed online at <http://jensgems.wordpress.com/2006/12/12/muzzling-women/>