

Silencing the Corinthian Women (I Corinthians 14:33b-36)

In 14:33-36 Paul states: 'As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak (*lalein*), but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful (*aischros*) for a woman to speak (*lalein*) in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?'. As indicated by the context, Paul seems to be motivated here by his concern for orderly conduct within the community. Only two or three prophets should speak on each occasion - one at a time - since 'God is a God not of disorder but of peace' (14:26-33). Everything must be done in a proper and orderly fashion (14:36-40).

Can Paul's prescription about the silence of women in worship be reconciled with his statement in I Cor. 11:5, where he implies that properly attired women can pray and prophesy in the Corinthian congregations ('any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered disgraces her head')? A number of solutions have been proposed, some relating specifically to the textual status of the passages and others which focus on exegetical issues.

i) The Textual Status of the Passage: Paul may not be the author of these verses, which were added by a later copyist who, in the words of Gordon Fee, 'felt that women should be kept in their place' (*Corinthians*, 699-705). There are certain features in this passage that are uncharacteristic of Paul's style and line of argumentation. These features include the unqualified appeal to the Law in 14:34, 'as the law also says' (since Paul usually cites the specific text he has in mind), particularly as neither the Torah nor Jesus traditions includes such a prohibition. The passage also addresses 'the churches' (14:34) rather than the congregation in particular, which is Paul's custom elsewhere in his correspondence with the Corinthians. Moreover, some early NT manuscripts place these verses (14:34-35) in a different position at the end of the chapter after the final words in 14:40, which explains why they are placed in brackets by the NRSV and set in a new paragraph. An early reader of Paul's letter could have added this passage in a margin (as a marginal gloss), thus prompting copyists of the manuscript to incorporate the words into the main text of the letter (some did so at the end of the chapter, others between 11:33 and 11:36). One of the main problems with this theory is that not one manuscript has survived which does not include the

section in question; consequently, if it was not an original part of Paul's letter, its inclusion by a reader of the letter must have occurred at a very early stage in its history.

Since not everyone is convinced by the argument about the secondary status of this passage, and in view of its prominence in Christian debates throughout the centuries, various solutions have been proposed which seek to analyse the text in its present form and to demonstrate that Paul is not being inconsistent with the views expressed in chapter 11.

ii) Private rather than Public Prophecy: It is claimed that Paul is speaking in 11:5 about private rather than public prophecy, whereas silence was imposed on women in the church. However, this distinction appears to be an artificial one, since I Corinthians 11 is also about worship within the assembly. Prophecy, like other spiritual gifts, is for the benefit of others (cf. 12:7: 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good').

iii) Married rather than Unmarried Women: Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*In Memory of Her*, 230-33) proposes that the women allowed to pray and prophesy (according to 11:2-16) were unmarried, whereas the present restriction and command to silence applies only to married women. The word used throughout this passage to denote the female members is *gynē*, a word which can cause some confusion since it can mean both 'wife' and 'woman'. The passage in its entirety may indicate that these women were thought to be wives, since clear reference is made in verse 35 to 'their husbands at home'.

iv) 'Chatter' rather than Inspired Speech: A related suggestion is that the prohibition here is not to refrain from prophesying or praying, but a restriction of certain kinds of disruptive speech such as chattering (the verb *lalein* is often used in classical Greek to mean 'chatter') and asking questions (v. 35a). In other words, Paul establishes a contrast between inspired speech (chapter 11), which he permits, and uninspired chatter (chapter 14), which he does not. Although Paul's use of the verb *lalein*, understood in the sense of 'chatter', is not a decisive argument in this respect (since this is a verb used elsewhere in this same chapter for inspired speech or prophecy), it is interesting to note that the reference to women not being permitted to speak (v. 34) is immediately followed by the call upon them in v. 35 to ask questions

(about worship) to their husbands at home. It could therefore be the case that wives were passing judgements on prophecies uttered by senior members of the congregation or even by their husbands.

v) Public Gatherings in a Private Place: It is interesting in this respect that some ambiguity could have been caused by the fact that these congregations probably met in private homes (house churches). If public worship was being held in a private home, could this create tension, say, for example, between wives and husbands? Did the male senior member of the household (known as the *paterfamilias*) retain his role as 'head' within the context of worship at another person's home, or did he become one member within the community?

Some of these proposals, particularly the last three, are not mutually exclusive, and may together cast light on this highly concise passage. If one retains the text in its present form, one must assume that Paul has been provoked by what he viewed as the disturbing behaviour of some women in the congregations, a behaviour that he viewed - like the shorn head of a woman (11:6) - as shameful (*aischros*; 14:35).