

SYNERGOI

For we are **GOD'S Fellow Workers... (1 Cor 3:9)**

θεου' γάρ ἐσμεν συνεργοί

A LETTER FOR LEADERS

PUBLISHED BY THE DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
OF THE EVANGELICAL MISSIONARY CHURCH
CANADA EAST DISTRICT - www.emccd.ca



DSel030130 [Jan 30, 2003]

Headship and 1 Corinthians 14 – Part 2 [Article #7]

1 Cor 14:33b-35: *As in all the meetings of the saints, 34 “the wives [of the prophets] should remain silent in the assemblies [during the hearing and weighing of prophecies]. They are not allowed to speak [just because they are married to a prophet], 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 wife [of a prophet who is not prophetically gifted] to speak in the meeting [during the hearing and weighing of prophecies].*

This is the amplified translation that I put at the end of my last article. In the previous paper, we have arguably established that unless these verses have an implicit limitation they stand in opposition to the specific teaching of chapter 11 and the tenor of chapters 12 to 14 in general. Women did pray and prophesy “in the church,” that is in “the meeting” of God’s people, which could be a single house meeting, or a gathering of many such cells. We also observed that virtually everyone consciously or unconsciously finds a way of limiting the prohibition. We also observed that the context is “the giving and weighing of prophecies.” Grudem suggests that Paul prohibits women from being involved in “the weighing of prophecies.” This allows Grudem to honour chapter 11. Grudem’s instinct is right but generalizing it to all women does not take into account that some women are given the same discernment and prophetic gifts as are given to men. It seems fair to conclude that these were not women recognized as exercising prophetic discernment. My suggestion is that Paul has in mind “the wives of the prophets” or at least women who have obviously no gifting or recognition to be involved in the giving or weighing of prophecies. The context before and after is about the prophets. The wives are told to ask their own husbands, which implies that the men were able to answer questions with understanding of the prophecies concerned (that is, the husbands were prophets). One cannot assume all the men in the meeting could answer questions concerning prophetic evaluation. Could it possibly include other women? It could be that certain of the troublemaking wives were the ringleaders of a coterie that might have included other women, but the immediate context seems to be targeting the wives of the prophets.

Let me restate the situation that Paul faces. We need to go back and consider the life setting a little more. Forget today – 2000 years of tradition and heritage, the NT, the church buildings, the well trained pastors, the ordering of church membership or the like. Among the Christians of Corinth there were the leading men of the church in Corinth. These leading men (probably called prophets) were the leaders of the various “house churches” that made the “church of God in Corinth” (1:1,2). [Were some of the leaders women? Priscilla comes to mind.] We do not know how organized they were, but it would seem that there was a fair amount of “visiting” among the various cells. We do know that they were disposed to conduct their meetings in such a way that

disorder seemed more marked than in some other communities. It seems to owe something to the character of the city itself.

The meetings of the Corinthians were free wheeling, in a city that gave its name to the swinging lifestyle – “to corinthianize.” Corinth was a port city and the temple of Aphrodite did a brisk business with its 1000 prostitutes. Like a person somewhat envious of a sibling’s superior culture, Corinth and her populace put on airs affecting the ways of Athens, a university city with a long and rich history of philosophical reflection, and was therefore open to some of the more fanciful “new age” thinking of the time. Corinth was large bustling city of perhaps 250,000 freemen and another 400,000 slaves – and the Gospel is beginning to take root in the lives of both slave and free. Paul was contending with a lot!

Disorder on the home front, and in the thought life was reflected in the newly born church in its various meetings. The Corinthian meetings (house churches, large and small) were not strong on order. Certain men and women who had pet themes would have been making their way through a number of the meetings. The prophetic style (and no doubt the musical preferences!) of their past would not be left behind. The ecstatic speech of the pagan oracles (involuntary, even uncontrolled) was what they knew – Delphi was nearby. A prophecy, to appear credible, needed to have that familiar “look and feel.” (How suspicious we still are of other branches of God’s church today when they approach the same things without our signature phrases). Paul is dealing with all this and still teaching about the Holy Spirit’s real person, presence, power and purity. And to top it off, within the many diverse house churches some are devoted to Jewish customs and traditions, perhaps bordering on a new idolatry, and some of these are so taken with this judaizing impulse that they doubt the spirituality of those who don’t keep the same food rules, the same religious calendar, etc. Then there are those who have so spiritualized things that they begin to teach that the resurrection has already happened (“we’re just waiting our turn for the body to drop off”) and in effect denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus; they are so full of their spiritual power that they deny the body by tending to asceticism; others deny the significance of the body by indulging in the sins of the flesh (antinomianism).

And Paul can’t just ship them a box of New Testaments! There is no NT yet! A factional church is difficult to navigate at the best of times. Paul can’t be there all the time. There are some good leaders and good people, and thank you, Lord Jesus, for Your Spirit. But it’s still a stormy sea. Paul is trying for a “base hit” not a “homerun” in his teaching. His approach is often pastoral and pragmatic rather than absolute and idealistic. He will settle for something that approaches good order. So he sets out a number of guidelines in chapters 12-14 to begin to see the situation corrected. Here’s a brief, breezy paraphrase of chapters 12-14:

Saying Jesus is cursed is a no! no!

Anybody who confesses Jesus as Lord does so by the work of the Spirit

People who serve others, who visit the sick and organize things, they are Spirit-gifted, too.

Sure, “speak in tongues” but...

You feel good when you do it, but if you have room a full of people speaking ecstatically who is going to understand you? Who is going to be encouraged? What are the interested non-believers going to think when they can’t understand a word you are saying?

So, if you are going to “speak in a language nobody else understands” make sure there is somebody around to interpret or be ready to interpret it yourself. Can’t? Be quiet!

There will still be some ecstatic speech that somebody fakes a translation for, sometimes piously, but the excesses will be far fewer and things will begin to change.

Remember what real spirituality is... Love, like Jesus incarnate – that’s what lasts forever – the circus stuff doesn’t last, even the other good stuff gives out.

But is this ecstatic speech or “speaking in a language nobody else understands” really prophecy? Well if it is... here are a few more guidelines...

None of this pagan, “I can’t help myself” stuff. – The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. There are community controls – let two or three prophets speak one at a time, and let the others consider it [Paul was not going to tackle directly how many really exercised a prophetic gift – Obviously these prophets were not of the ilk of Jeremiah, or Isaiah; neither could they speak with the authority of the apostle Paul.]

If one of the prophets in this disorderly bunch started getting so itchy in his or her seat that he or she couldn’t wait to speak, the person standing had to stop and “be silent” – a very useful self-correcting measure. Prophecy one by one – that ought to put the brakes to some of the stage hogs – (I do not suppose that the good men and women back then had any fewer foibles than the good men and women of today!)

One by one – that means that I’m going to have to listen to the others.

One by one – that means that the others will evaluate what I’m going to say

One by one – I’m going to have to make sense!

One by one – Lord, help!

One by one – Maybe, I’ll just keep my mouth shut. I wish a few others would, too.

And, now about the women.

Women can prophesy – we set the guidelines out earlier

But there are women who just need to keep quiet and listen to their own husbands! And some of them are the wives of the prophets!

Their own husbands – not taking the new found freedom in Christ to be going from meeting to meeting and playing up to the men they like, especially the leading men (prophets)

Their own husbands – not disrespecting the principle of preeminence “as the law says”

Their own husbands – not drawing attention to themselves and disrupting the meetings

Their own husbands – those who do want to learn something and are not simply asking questions to draw attention to themselves

Why didn’t Paul say it all more clearly? Commentators who have never written a pastoral letter or preached to real people will not understand the value of a studied ambiguity. I am not supposing to understand with any great certainty all the *who’s* and *what’s* of Paul’s statements. All I am advocating is that sometimes you don’t say things as crisply as you might because you have in your mind multiple end-listeners. And you hope that some will get it without having to name them! It may be that Paul in writing this pastoral letter has in mind a couple of disruptive wives of leaders who just needed to understand that their status as spouse of an acknowledged leader did not endow them with prophetic gifting.

The emancipatory message of Christ had been received in Corinth but it had been misapplied (with regard to food offered to idols, sexual mores, the duties within marriage, and so on). There are certain women, I think, probably clustered around the wives of the leading men of the various house churches in Corinth, who accompany their husbands. And perhaps these wives, at least two or three of them, are wont to preen and to warble for attention, when the prophets were delivering their addresses and the other prophets were discussing. And they were getting involved in discussions when they were not, gifted, trained or recognized (authorized) to participate. They were out of order, perhaps playing up to other husbands, embarrassing their own husbands.

One can assume that the various leaders of the house churches got together to discuss matters of theological and pastoral importance. The wives came too. Some of the wives might have gotten involved asking questions that embarrass their husbands. So the blanket rule is, “pastoral wives

don't ask questions of other pastors which might put you in a position of showing disrespect to your own husband. Even the prophets have to stop and defer to one another, so what are you doing upstaging your own husband or playing up to another pastor? The principle of preeminence is applicable – a husband, as a matter of creation order, has a right to expect your respect.”

Is this passage relevant to the matter of headship? My answer, Yes. As in chapter 11, there is an appeal, here more compressed -- *as the Law says* -- to the order of creation. Remember that “the Law” can be used for the Books of Moses but also for what we call “the Old Testament.” In any case, it is certain that Paul is once again applying the principle that is explicit in chapter 11. Paul used the same principle in chapter 11 as a corrective, all the while affirming that women did pray and prophesy in church. It is a principle in addressing disorderly conduct of women that he cannot use with men.

The word ὑποτάσσω translated “submit” was used in Greek to mean “to submit to the orders or directives of someone — ‘to obey, to submit to, obedience, submission.’” (Louw & Nida). This word is used for example in Tit 2:9 of slaves obeying their masters, 2 Cor 9:13 of believers obeying God, Heb 13:17 of believers obeying church leaders! [I wonder if there is the same willingness to be stringent in the application of this obedience to church leaders?]

Paul does not abandon first principles but applies them to restore good order and harmony. The application of 1 Cor 14 concerns women who are not gifted and recognized in the exercise of prophetic discernment and gifting. The corrective concerns women who are bringing disrepute to their husbands, and in my best understanding concerns specifically the wives of men in leadership. [I can think of a number of present day real life analogies.] Paul is not addressing the issue of women gifted and recognized for their prophetic discernment and gifting. Paul's remedy tells us that he is dealing with women who have no business participating in the discussions on the preaching and teaching (prophesying). They should just keep quiet. Their participation is disruptive, which is self-evident. Paul's remedy – “ask their own husbands” – indicates that their questions in the meeting brought some kind of disrepute to their husband.

Relevance to women in leadership?

This passage tells us nothing about women in leadership but about women who do not have prophetic discernment or gifting, and who are not recognized as such.

Relevance to male headship?

Paul is happy to use this principle in dealing with the disorderly conduct of women, in which there is overt disrespect for one's husband. This was still the easiest lever in dealing pastorally with the situation he faced.

We will still need to give consideration to 1 Timothy 2; Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3. More to come ... In Thoughtful Love and Service, Pastor Phil

Pastor Phil