

The Apostle Paul: On Keeping Silent

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Galatians 3:26-29 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

1Cor. 7:1 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." 2 But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

1Cor. 11:2 I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. 3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. 4 Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, 5 but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. 6 For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. 7 For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. 8 Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. 9 Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. 10 For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. 12 For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? 14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair

is given to her for a covering. 16 But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

1Cor. 14:33 for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

(As in all the churches of the saints, 34 women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. 35 If 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. 36 Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?)

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Imagine with me: a world in which people have been divided into a very elaborate and tiered caste system. Men born free and citizens are the rulers of this world. They have the power to do what they want to whom they want, with very few normative rules to restrain them. Theirs is the power for which all strive or covet. Next come freed men, only slightly less powerful. Then free-born and freed women, but the power that remains with them is limited severely. Women are good for only one thing: to give birth to strong, healthy boys, who will grow into the men of power. When they cannot accomplish this task they are viewed as mostly worthless. Slaves, both male and female are last in this caste system, and their status is next to that of an animal. They are to be used, in any and every way, and once they are no longer useful, they are discarded as such.

The tiers are further extended by career choice, attractiveness, wealth or political status, which contributed to where one might fall on the scale of power - how influential a man or woman could be. Status is everything: it follows a person everywhere. Not only is it a part of who they are, but it must be worn like a banner; Respectable women were allowed to wear head coverings, prostitutes or slave women were not. For all hair was a status symbol: both men and women with full heads of hair were more powerful or attractive. Clothing matters, schooling matters. What's more: it is easy to slide down the scale. Advantages are taken of young women and men that can change the course of their life and status forever.

In addition to the layers of power differentials, the normative behavior when it came to relationships between men and women can be described as transactional at best and violent and abusive at worst. There is no expectation of equality, no assumption that the purpose of relationships are anything more than servicing the needs of the powerful, no sense of give and take, only take.¹

This is the world in which Paul writes. As we heard in the various passages I read from the letters of Paul, Paul says a lot about women in his letters to various churches. Much of which doesn't sit to well with our 21st century sensibilities. It may be obvious to you that these passages from 1 Corinthians are the verses from which Paul gains his reputation as a misogynist. These represent the bulk of what Paul says about women, excluding the passages in the pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus.

Now might be the best time to illuminate why I am focusing on Corinthians and not the Pastoral letters. There are some here who have read extensively on Paul and some for whom Paul is fairly unknown, so it's important to get some textual issues out in the open. Paul, as we discussed last week, was one of the early apostles who spread the news of the death and resurrection of Jesus throughout the Greco-Roman world. He was known for getting into trouble with folks of all sorts, and was the founder of church communities in several different cities and towns throughout the ancient world.

Of the 27 books in the New Testament, 14 have traditionally been attributed to Paul. However, scholars have determined that it is more likely that Paul wrote only 7 of those letters, the rest likely written by another author who wrote in Paul's name, a common act in the ancient world.

The letters most scholars agree were written by Paul are: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and the letter to Philemon. The other letters are commonly referred to as Paul's "contested letters." Even more closely related to our texts for this morning, the last passage on women keeping silent in church is hotly debated as to whether or not Paul actually wrote it, the reason being because the verses appear in various places in different copies of the text – meaning that it was likely written in the margin of a manuscript,

either by Paul or by another interpreter of Paul, and scribes disagreed as to where or whether to keep it in the text.

The struggle with all this debate is that it is unlikely that we will ever truly know whether these texts were written by Paul or not. These statements fit in some ways with Paul's cultural context as a Jew and a Greek, and in some ways they contradict some of Paul's other statements - in particular the Galatians passage read prior to the 1 Corinthians texts. How can Paul say that there is neither Jew nor Greek, Male nor Female, Slave nor Free for all are one in Christ Jesus, and then say that women should be silent, or that men are the head of women? It doesn't make a whole lot of sense as readers in our modern context.

But in the context of Paul's world, perhaps it did. Paul was speaking in a world where the norms of behavior between men and women were so different from our own it is hard to imagine. When Paul says that all women should worship with their head covered, what we don't understand is that during Paul's time, head covering was a sign of respect, and some women were denied the opportunity to receive that respect. Prostitutes and slaves would have been severely punished for having their head covered - it showed that they were acting higher than their caste allowed. But Paul says all women should cover their heads in worship - what might this have meant for those who would be denied respect in a world so tiered with power dynamics?

What's more, in the Greco-Roman world, there was absolutely no place that allowed men and women to assemble together in public. Women present in public assembly was presented as a farce in poetry and Greek writings. But from Paul's letters we know that women and men gathering together was common in the early church. We also know from Paul's letters that in some of these churches, women were permitted to prophesy out loud even as he tells them to be silent in Corinth.

Paul's statements on marriage also contributed to what might have been the very earliest beginnings of a women's movement, when women were given by Paul grounds on which to refuse marriage for religious reasons. The upset this seemed to cause was enormous - women were martyred for choosing celibacy. Perhaps, even, Paul's words were the precursor to understanding marriage as a

mutual engagement. While Paul's rationale seems misogynist, he describes marriage as a reciprocal relationship. How radical this might be in a society where the purpose of women was to be used by a man for childbearing and nothing else.

Paul names in many of his letters (particularly the letter to the Romans) a long list of women: Phoebe, Prisca and Aquila, Mary, Junia are only a few of those he names, calling them apostles even greater than himself as well as deacons, sisters in the faith, saints, and mothers and benefactors. He commends them to churches, honoring them publicly even as more valuable than himself - something that Free-born citizens would rarely do in writing. In fact, much of what Paul says about women would have been radically feminist for the times in which he lived.

But the few verses in Galatians suggest that Paul was interested in something far beyond equality.² Paul understood the gospel of Christ Jesus to have shattered the world that we know, replacing it with a new creation. When he says that there is no longer Jew or Greek, Male or Female, Slave or Free, he is naming the major power battles in the Greco-Roman world. This is no small thing for a world defined by the haves and the have nots. It is no small thing for us today.

In contrast with Paul's world, let's imagine our world: a world where the word "relationship" itself connotes a certain level of reciprocity. Violent behavior between two people, any two people is almost always unapproved and illegal. Power dynamics have changed significantly. Slavery is no longer acceptable, men and women both participate in virtually every career available and thrive in all realms of society. The norms of what is acceptable for men and what is acceptable for women - in vocation, at home, in marriage are very different than the world I first described.

There are some things that are similar, though. While we can't relate so much to the more obvious power dynamics, we can certainly relate to the subtle ones. We still live in a world where the type of car you drive or your career choice effects the way you will be received by another. We still live in world that splits people into categories: citizen, immigrant; married, single; working, unemployed; wealthy, poor... We still live in a world where clothing matters, along with

hairstyle and beauty and political contacts... Power is still at reign in our lives and in our world = who has it, who can get it, who can use it to their own advantage.

What might it be like if we stopped striving for equality in power and started striving for Christ? What might it mean for us if we did not see in each other the things that give us power in this world: race, gender, wealth, background - but instead we saw the Christ who calls us and loves us and binds us together. There is no citizen, no immigrant, no woman or man, no parent or child, no skin color or jail time - but only Christ that binds, only Christ who shines through us. As many of us were baptized in Christ are clothed in Christ, Paul says. Put on Christ who makes us one.

Paul's words are Utopic and eschatological, which brings up another aspect of Paul's writing. It is clear that Paul thought the second coming of Christ was immanent. He speaks of the crisis of our present age, the glory about to be revealed, the time when we will be caught up in the heavens. He thinks the time is near when he and other believers will be brought together in God's glory in the end times. As his life goes on, this intensity dissipates in his letters as we would expect. But Paul continues to straddle the gap between two worlds: One world in which Christ's salvation and grace has already made all things new, and another in which the world has not yet caught up with God's new creation. Paul lives in the Already, but not yet of the Gospel.

He is both provisional and eschatological. He is both practical and utopic. He is present and future tense at the same time. And so are we.

Pastor Martin Copenhaaver³ tells a story about his grandmother, who at the age of 15 knew she was called to be a preacher. She told her father, who brought her to their local pastor to inform him of his daughter's calling. The year was 1905, well before any church even considered letting women speak in church. They gave no thought to that fact, no thought to the fact that it had never been done before, no thought to the ways in which the world must change to accommodate her calling. No thought to the powers of the world - only to God's power to call whom God wills and equip them for the work of the gospel. This is what it means to live in Paul's world.

If we as women (and as men...) are to look to Paul to help regulate or appease our power-driven relationships we might be missing Paul's primary message: that God's power is the only power that matters. Paul urged us to see in all people the love of God, the grace of Christ. He urged us to put away the powers of this world: put away sexuality and race and citizenship and gender.

Put away what you think God could do in this world of power struggles and battles over land use and discussions of who you think deserves to be in or out and who you might allow to do what where. Put it away. See Christ. Put on Christ. Understand how Christ binds you and compels you. Strive toward what is greater - strive toward God - and you will find a power beyond this world.

With God's help may it be so.

¹ Much of this description of the Ancient World is informed by Sarah Ruden's book, "Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in his own time" Pantheon Books, New York 2010

² I owe a significant part of my understanding of Paul, and in particular this passage in Galatians, to Dr. Beverly Gaventa, who taught my course on Romans at Princeton Seminary. Dr. Gaventa's book, "Our Mother Saint Paul" Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville/London 2007, was wonderfully helpful and inspiring as I moved through this series on Paul.

³ Christian Century, "Living the Word," by Martin Copenhaaver, August 2010