

The Law in 1 Corinthians 14:34: To What Law is Paul Appealing?

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In Essay 2, “Headship in the Church (Part 2),” I explored the New Testament texts that use *hupotasso* (to submit) in reference to women. There, I devoted a few paragraphs to 1 Cor 14:33-34. Summarizing that argument, I noted that in this passage, the admonition for women to be silent and under submission is the third of three commands made by Paul with the purpose of remedying a disorderly worship service. In each of these three exhortations, there is an appeal for practicing silence, while the call to submit (*hupotasso*) only occurs in the final two. To review, then, tongues speakers were to be silent (1st use) when two or three persons were already speaking and, more critically, when there was no one to interpret (v. 27-28). Next, the prophets were to likewise take turns and if a new revelation came to another prophet the first prophet was to go silent (2nd use) because the spirits of the prophets are subject (first use of *hupotasso*) to the other prophets. I concluded that this context indicates that the call for women’s silence and submission occurs in reference to the rules of order observed by all churches, and thus is not intended to regulate gender relations in general. 1 Cor 11 makes it clear that women did speak as prophets in the church service. Therefore, unless Paul contradicts himself, I am forced to conclude that 1 Cor 14 is not commanding an absolute silence on the part of women during the worship service nor does it prohibit their public participation in it. Rather, their silence and submission is parallel to the previous two cases of silence and the one prior case of submission, namely, they are to submit to a universal church practice of order in worship.

In Essay 2, I also mentioned Paul’s appeal to the law very briefly, noting, “I cannot find any law in the Old Testament (OT) commanding women to any kind of silence. I have looked up all the words for silence and find no corresponding link to any duty for women. A good number of scholars cite Gen 3:16 as the ‘law’ in question. This may well be so, but I would point out, as I did above [i.e. earlier in Essay 2], that the language and syntax of Gen 3:16 does not make the female gender subject to the male gender. Gen 3:16 submitted one woman to one man, to whom she was married.”¹ I later concluded, “Frankly, however, while I think Gen 3:16 is likely what Paul had in mind, I must admit he does not specify what law he had in mind so we cannot be dogmatic that he is appealing to Gen 3:16.”² Since writing this over two years ago, I have been challenged to reflect more on the question of the identity of this “law” in 1 Cor 14:34. I thus return to the question, “to what law does Paul refer?”

First and foremost, I note that Paul gives no reference to the “law” on which he is basing his point. This differs from his previous appeals to the law in 1 Corinthians, in which Paul cites his sources. For example, Paul labels a quote from Isaiah as “the law” just a few verses earlier (1

¹Quoted from Essay 2.

²Ibid.

Cor 14: 21; quoting Isa 28:11-12), and in 1 Cor 9, he quotes from the Mosaic law on the ox threshing the grain (1 Cor 9:8-9; quoting Deut 25:4). But in 1 Cor 14:34, Paul does not tell us which law he has in mind, and he seems to assume the Corinthians already know what this law is. Thus, ANY proposed view on which law Paul is citing is a non-inspired personal opinion, should not be equated with biblical authority,³ and must be treated with caution. However, we are not left without some indication of what this law might be.

An important point is that the prior appeals to “the law” in 1 Corinthians drew from Moses and Isaiah. Thus, “the law” can refer to the Old Testament in general and not just to the books of Moses. This means that the Gen 3:16 option is not as strongly implied because the whole Old Testament is brought into play, not just the books of Moses. But neither is Gen 3:16 eliminated for it is a part of the Old Testament. So the question remains: to which Old Testament teaching might Paul be appealing? I increasingly reject Gen 3:16 as the answer for the following reasons.

First, the Gen 3:16 position *assumes* that Gen 3:16 subjugates the female gender to the male gender in general relations. I have, however, previously shown (see Essay 2) that this interpretation cannot be correct, for the grammar and syntax of Gen 3:16 restricts the pronouncement to a husband-wife relationship. Any application to gender is imposing a Platonic-style philosophical template onto Genesis, making Adam and Eve the archetypes of gender relations. This Platonic-style interpretation stands in sharp contrast to Moses who presents the Edenic couple as the archetype of marriage relations, not general gender relations. To assume Paul is referring to a gender regulation that does not actually exist in Gen 3:16, seems dubious. Furthermore, given the fact that Paul makes no pronouncements on gender relations in the 1 Cor 14 passage, the position that Paul is promoting female submission to males in 1 Cor 14, becomes all the more problematic.

Second, after looking up all words in the Old Testament that appear to have some relationship to being silent, I find no laws commanding women to be silent in any setting, including worship. At important events such as renewing the covenant, all Israel – men, women, and children – assemble for the reading of the covenant (Deut 31:10-12) and they are all to keep silence (Deut 27:9), but there is no segregation of participation nor specific commands to silence specifically for women. While Habakkuk calls for silence because “the Lord is in His holy temple,” this is a call to all on earth, not just women. It seems, then, that there is no Old Testament law that would command only women to be silent in worship.

Third, because of the injunction to “ask their husbands at home,” some assert that the submission of the women in 1 Cor 14 is marital submission to their husbands. From this assertion, they then move to cite Gen 3:16, after which they make the platonic-style extrapolation to gender. However, I have already shown that the context of 1 Cor 14 makes the submission of the women parallel to the submission of the prophets to the rules of order for the congregation. If we allow this context to inform our understanding, their asking their husbands at home seems more about making the service orderly, not about marital roles as such. Additionally, Paul develops no marriage theology in this passage. Might it be possible that by focusing the issues of

³This is a very similar point to what I make regarding 1 Tim 2:12. See Essay 3 for more details.

silence and submission that we are asking the wrong questions?

If we focus on Paul's central concern, it is that things be done "decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:40). More critically, two indicators show that Paul is appealing to standardized practice in all churches as the template for the Corinthians to follow.

First, he closes off and transitions from the submission of the prophets to the submission of the women with two, rapid-fire references to "the churches" (1 Cor 14:33,34). "For God is not confusion but peace as in all the churches of the saints and the women are to be quiet in the churches" (v. 33-34; a literal translation). These rapid-fire mentions of the "churches" show that Paul is calling for the Corinthians to follow the universal worship practices observed in all churches instead of being individualistic in their own way of worship.

Second, this appeal to the practice of the churches is reinforced by the apparently sarcastic rebuke in v. 36: "Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?" In other words, Paul is chiding the Corinthians as if they are claiming some unique revelation given only to them that justifies their chaotic and unique style of worship. Paul's concern, then, is that in their disorderly and chaotic services, the Corinthians are at odds with universally recognized worship practices in the rest of Christianity. Perhaps the real question to ask, then, is this: Does the Old Testament have a law, or laws, commanding unity in worship practice? If so, might Paul be appealing to those laws rather than to Gen 3:16? It seems plausible that this might be the case.

In Exodus 12:49 and Numbers 9:14, foreigners may join Israel in the Passover celebration but they must observe the feast in the same way as the Jew. Each text then concludes with a phrase to this effect: "You shall have one law, both for the sojourner and for the native." Likewise, in Numbers 15:15-16, if the stranger or sojourner wished to offer a food offering, there is "one law" for the native and the stranger on how to make this offering. Finally, Numbers 15 has "one law" for native and stranger (vs 29) in reference to the offering for an unintentional sin. Thus, we have four references to worship and cultic practices in which Israel is told there is to be one law regulating practices for all whether native (Jew), or stranger (Gentile).

This call for oneness in worship is reinforced by the centralization of worship at the tabernacle. Three times a year, all Israelite males were to leave their land and come to the tabernacle to worship as a single congregation before the Lord (Exo 23:17; 34:23; Deut 16:16). The concept of the whole people being a single congregation is further seen, for example, when Moses calls all the congregation together to present Sabbath practices (Exo 35:1-20), and is also a widespread phenomenon in the Pentateuch. Israel fundamentally sees itself as one spiritual body, as did the New Testament Church.

That the Israelites valued unity in worship practice is seen in Joshua 22:10-34. In this story, the tribes east of the Jordan built a large altar, replicating the tabernacle altar. Their intent was that it be reminder of their spiritual unity and connection with the western tribes. It was not built for offering sacrifice. The western tribes, however, did not know their intent, and thought the easterners were launching a competing, alternate worship cult. So the western tribes formed a military coalition and confronted the eastern tribes. Their argument centered on the policy that there is to be only *one* altar for true worship, at the tabernacle (v. 19). Thus, a competing altar was viewed as a breach of covenant with the larger coalition of tribes by decentralizing worship from the tabernacle. The eastern tribes verified their agreement with the policy of one worship at

the tabernacle (v. 29) and explained that they had no plans to offer sacrifices on it, that is, the altar was not meant to be used for worship purposes. Rather, it was a reminder for future generations that those east of the Jordan were still connected in heritage and practice geographically centered in places west of the Jordan. Furthermore, appeal was made to the negative effects of separatism within “the congregation of Israel,” thus reinforcing the unity-in-practice theme (v. 20). The Israelites were so concerned about being united in worship that they risked a civil war over unity in worship practice.

Old Testament law, then, had a two-fold position on unified worship policy. First, natives and strangers – Jews and Gentiles – who participated in the Passover did so according to the same single law. Second, this was applied in Israel that all Israel should be united in worship practice and place. Tribal individualism was not permitted. (This is why Jeroboam’s alternate worship sites in the northern kingdom were so problematic. They reinforced the division of Israel.) It seems highly plausible, then, that Paul’s call for the Corinthians to be united with the rest of the churches in worship practice reflects the spirit of these Old Testament laws, and that these laws could well constitute the “law” to which Paul appeals. The plurality of laws of this genre could also explain why Paul makes no specific citation to one law.

Furthermore, in light of the fact that the early church first was formed with a membership of messianic Jews – exemplified in Paul’s tendency to plant a church by first evangelizing Jews (easily seen in the book of Acts and Paul’s policy of preaching to the “Jew first”) – would suggest that this strong Jewish contingent would likely have a passion for unity in worship practice across individual congregations in the new Christian movement.

Finally, the Corinthian church may have been mostly Gentile in composition with little to no Jewish membership, and this might have tempted them to excuse divergence from standard practice based on their non-Jewish ethnicity. By contrast, Paul seems to follow the Old Testament command that Jew and Gentile worshiped under “one law” and thus appeals for unity with the other churches. [The Sabbath commandment provides another example of Jew and Gentile being under the same law, reinforcing the concepts seen in the other laws in Exodus and Numbers, but I shall not further develop the Sabbath element here.]

It seems plausible, then, that the law to which Paul appeals is the Old Testament policy about unity in worship practice. Such a conclusion fits well with the context of fixing problems in public worship that deviated from the practices of the other churches. This conclusion is further reinforced by the fact that I have already shown (in Essay 2) that the key “gender” text (Gen 3:16) does not actually regulate gender relations but only marital relations, which are not under discussion in 1 Cor 14. Furthermore, no other Old Testament text seems to call for a subjection of the female gender to the male gender. Thus, in light of the literary context of 1 Cor 14, it seems more prudent to conclude that call for the women’s submission in this passage is a submission to the church order in orderly worship, not to males, and that the principle of a united church order throughout the congregations is grounded in the Old Testament regulations prescribing “one law” of worship for all, whether Jew or Gentile. I contend that this “church unity” conclusion provides a simpler, more defensible position as to the identity of the law to which Paul appeals. If this conclusion is correct, it harmonizes well with my previous observations (especially in Essay 2) and provides a sound, biblical basis that more fully eliminates using 1 Cor 14:33-34 as a tool to deny women the opportunity to fully participate in

the public worship life of the church. At the same time, 1 Cor 14 highlights the value of avoiding excessive congregational individualism, reminding us we are part of a single body of Christ and should not use our freedoms in a way that contributes to chaos in the churches at large. We are accountable to each other and need to guard our unity as we work through differences in practice.