

## Pandemonium and silence at Corinth

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Although we may idealize the early church, most of us would not have enjoyed a visit to a worship service at Corinth. The impression which one was most likely to receive was that of chaos and delirious insanity:

*So if the whole congregation is assembled and all are using the "strange tongues" of ecstasy, and some uninstructed persons or unbelievers should enter, will they not think you are mad? (1 Cor. 14:23, NEB).*

While that may seem appalling to us, the ancient Greeks considered madness an important aspect of worship. Women in particular responded to Bacchus (also known as Dionysus), the god of madness; "him of the orgiastic cry, exciter of women, Dionysus, glorified with mad honors" (Plutarch, *Moralia* 671c). Ancient Corinth was a center of Dionysiac worship, and Pausanias, world traveller of the second century of our era, gives us this description:

*In the market-place, for most of the temples are there, is Ephesian Artemis, and there are two wooden statues of Dionysus, gilt except the faces, which are painted with red paint, one they call Lysian Dionysus and the other Dionysus the Reveller. The tradition about these statues I will record. Pentheus, they say, when he outraged Dionysus, among other acts of reckless daring actually at last went to Mount Cithaeron to spy on the women, and climbed up into a tree to see what they were doing; and when they detected him, they forthwith dragged him down, and tore him limb from limb. And afterwards, so they say at Corinth, the Pythian priestess told them to discover that tree and pay it divine honors. And that is why these statues are made of that very wood. (Description of Greece, II.ii; tr. A.R. Shilleto).*

There was in Corinth, then, a significant monument memorializing the savagery of female Bacchus worshippers. Nor was such a feminine ferocity confined to Pentheus alone. Women under the inspiration of Bacchus were said to have torn Orpheus limb from limb; and Alexander the Great was supposed to have incorporated a group of these maenads (mad women) into his army in his attempt to conquer India. There was also a tradition that women during the course of the worship tore apart young animals and ate them raw, warm, and bleeding, thereby receiving within themselves the life of the god. In a 1976 address to the Mystery Religions Division of the Society of Biblical Literature, Ross Kraemer argued that there is evidence that women participated in a second level of initiation in Bacchic worship which was not available to men. Among Dionysiac worshippers, writes Livy in his *History of Rome*, "the majority are women." (XXXIX.xv).

While women were famed for their wildness in the Bacchic cult and in certain other mystery cults, other aspects of their worship were more traditional. Of special importance to the study of the situation Paul addresses is the concept of *clamor*, noisy outbursts of religious pandemonium. Strabo (first century) explains how popular writers describe the phenomenon:

*They represent them, one and all, as a kind of inspired people and as subject to Bacchic frenzy, and, in the guise of minister, as inspiring terror at the celebration of the sacred rites by means of war-dances accompanied by uproar and noise and cymbals and drums and also by flute and outcry . . . (Georg. X.3:7).*

The "sounding gong and tinkling cymbal" used in such worship are mentioned in a derogatory sense in I Corinthians 13:1; but the religious outcry itself is dealt with more directly. It is essential that we understand that much of the shouting involved in the rite was the specific function of women. Euripides describes the advent of Dionysiac religion to Thebes thus: "This city, first in Hellas, now shrills and echoes "To my women's cries, their ecstasy of joy" (*Bacchae*, II, 20-24). The word used here for "cry" is *olulugia*, defined by the *Etymologicum Magnum* as "the sound which women make to exult in worship" and by E. R. Dodds as "the women's ritual cry of triumph or thanksgiving." Pausanias tells of "the mountain they say was called Eva from the Bacchic cry 'Evoe' which Dionysus and his attendant women first uttered there" (*Descr. of Greece*, IV, xxxi). Menander also demonstrates women's role in worship: "We were offering sacrifice five times a day, and seven serving women were beating cymbals around us while the rest of the women pitched high the chant (*olulugia* )" (Fragment 326). Women were expected, then, to provide certain types of sound-effects; and some of these effects seem to have been limited to feminine ministrants.

Apart from savagery and shouting, ancient writers usually describe worshippers of Dionysus as engaging in dancing, drinking, sexual promiscuity, varying degrees of undress, and other forms of excessive behavior. It was only in frenzy that one could hold communion with the god, or--in ecstasy so great that the soul seemed to leave the body--to become one with him.

There are significant indications that the old pagan religion still exerted a powerful influence on the recent converts at Corinth. They were uncomfortable over meat that had been offered to idols (8:1-13), and they had to be reminded not to attend sacrificial meals in pagan temples (10:20,21). As in Bacchic feasts, there was drunkenness at the Lord's Supper and ecstatic madness at the worship services. A surprising description comes from the pen of the neo-Platonist Iamblichus as he explains the mystery cults, the popular religions of the day, for Dionysus was not the only god who inspired frenzy:

*It is necessary to investigate the causes of the divine frenzy (madness). These are illuminations that come down from the gods, the inspirations that are imparted from them, and the absolute authority from them, which not only encompasses all things in us but banishes entirely away the notions and activities which are peculiarly our own. The frenzy causes words to be let fall that are not uttered with the understanding of those who speak them; but it is declared, on the contrary, that they are sounded with a frenzied mouth, the speakers being all of them subservient and entirely controlled by the energy of a dominant intelligence. All enthusiasm is of such a character, and is brought to perfection from causes of such a kind (The Egyptian Mysteries, tr. Alexander Wilder, pp. 119f).*

Too often we regard speaking in tongues as a purely Christian phenomenon, but it was known in the ancient ecstatic religions; and Aristophanes in *Frogs* mentions "the tongue of Bacchos" (357). While a heathen might babble without consciousness of what he was saying, there is no indication that speaking a known language without prior

instruction was practiced outside of a Christian context. On the Day of Pentecost, such languages were part of the kerygmatic proclamation of the gospel (Acts 2:4-11).

In 1 Corinthians it is clear that the gift of ecstatic language is a gift of the Holy Spirit (12:10). Yet it is also clear that the situation described in 1 Corinthians 14 lacked the control of the Spirit, and that other, disruptive elements were present. It is obvious that there could be little sharing, because too many were trying to talk at once; and much of what was being said required an interpreter to make it meaningful. Paul insists that only two or three may talk in tongues at any one meeting, and that they must have an interpreter. He who lacks an interpreter must keep silence (vs. 28). It is more desirable to build up the church through prophecy, and two or three may take turns prophesying. The person who holds the floor must keep silence (vs. 30) if someone else has a new revelation to share. The prophets must control themselves and respond to the group (vs. 32). For God is not the Lord of confused tumult (as was Bacchus) but rather of peace (vs. 33). When the Corinthians had been "carried away" (12:1f.) in the cult of "dumb idols" they had felt themselves powerless to resist their force and fury, but Paul's message here is one of self-control under the influence of the Holy Spirit. If everyone feels impelled to speak at once, it is not the work of God, who would have all things done decently and in order (vs. 40).

It is in this context of self-control that women are asked to subdue themselves within the bounds of propriety (vs.35). Although the translations are rarely the same, the same Greek verb is used in both verses 32 and 35. *Hupotasso*, meaning to arrange or place under, is in the middle voice, indicating that the person does this to him or herself. The concept of self-control is brought out in most translations of verse 32:

*It is for prophets to control prophetic inspiration, for the God who inspires them is not a God of disorder but of peace.*

*New English Bible*

*For the spirits of speakers (in tongues) are under their control (and subject to being silenced as may be necessary). For He (Who is the source of their prophesying) is not a God of confusion and disorder but of peace and order. As (is the practice) in all the churches of the saints (God's people).*

*Amplified New Testament*

*The spirits of prophets are under their own control.*

*Weymouth*

*Prophets can always control their prophetic spirits since God is not a God of disorder but of peace.*

*Jerusalem Bible*

*The spirit of a true preacher is under that preacher's control, for God is not a God of disorder but of harmony, as is plain in all the churches.*

*J. B. Phillips*

*The gift of speaking God's message should be under the speaker's control.*

*Good News for Modern Man*

*The spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets.*

*Revised Standard Version*

*Remember that a person who has a message from God has the power to stop himself or wait his turn.*

When the subject is so clearly self-control, how can the same verb be translated so differently in the very same passage when it applies to women? Quite literally, verse 35 reads, "let them [women] control themselves, as the law also says." As women's behavior tended to be far wilder than that of men, such legislation had been enacted in both Greek and Roman society. According to Plutarch's *Lives*, Solon, in conjunction with Epimenides (an expert in ecstatic religion), had established laws aimed at curbing the cultic excesses of women. There was a special effort to restrain women at nocturnal orgies with men - conditions which must have seemed to an unbeliever not unlike those prevailing in the Corinthian worship service. Cicero wrote in his *Laws*:

*Well, then, let us return to our laws, in which it is most diligently ordained that the clear daylight should be the safeguard of female virtue in the eyes of the multitude; and that they should only be initiated in the mysteries of Ceres, according to the Roman custom.*

*In reference to this topic, we have an extraordinary instance of the severity of our ancestors in the public prosecution and punishment of the Bacchanals by the senate, supported by the consular armies. And this severity of the Roman government is not singular, since Diagonadas of Thebes, in the middle of Greece, suppressed all nocturnal mysteries by a perpetual prohibition. (II,xv; tr. C. D. Yange).*

Before the Roman senate passed stringent legislation limiting Bacchic participation, matters were explained by the consul:

*In the first place, then, women form the great majority, and this was the source of all the mischief. Then there are males, the very counterparts of the women, committing and submitting to foulest uncleanness, frantic and frenzied, driven out of their senses by sleepless nights, by wine, by nocturnal shouting and uproar (Livy, XXXIX, xv; tr. in David Balch's 1974 Yale Ph. D. thesis *Let Wives Be Submissive*).*

Phintys reported that the law of the city forbade any woman to participate in the orgies of the Great Mother (*Stobaeus*, IV, 23.61), in an attempt to control improprieties. While biblical scholars have vainly searched for such a law in Jewish tradition, there is considerable evidence that every legal effort was made to control ecstatic feminine behavior in Greco-Roman society. There is even more evidence that such efforts sometimes failed. It can be seen, however, that it was important to the early church that the behavior of their women should be above reproach and within the bounds of the law, for the charge of Bacchic behavior was hurled at the Christians by unbelievers (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, viii).

*" . . . the peculiar usages of Sabazian worship make ready for the Bacchic enthusiasm, the purifying of souls, deliverance from old incriminations . . . "*

We turn next to a consideration of silence and speech as it is enjoined in 1 Corinthians 14:34. We have already noted that one who speaks with tongues but has no interpreter is asked to keep silence, as is the prophet when someone else desires to speak. It is not a complete prohibition for these individuals to share their gifts, but rather an instruction so that all may understand and all may profit. Only one person at a time is to share his revelation and only if it can be made meaningful to the congregation.

The second important emphasis in the chapter is on *meaning*. Paul himself would rather speak five comprehensible words than thousands which could not be understood (vs. 19). He asks that those elements which are disruptive or meaningless be silenced. In this way we may understand the dictum:

*The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak (Greek: lalein) (I Cor. 14:34, RSV).*

It cannot mean that women are not to speak at all, for they have been given permission to pray and prophesy in 11:5 - provided they observe due decorum. Nor can the directive be a prohibition against speaking in tongues (14:39). Some other type of disruption must thus be under discussion.

It may help us to understand that the Greek word *lalein* refers primarily to utterance rather than to meaningful communication. The term is used repeatedly in chapter 14 to describe speaking in tongues. Phrynichus, the ancient dictionarian, defined the term as "to talk nonsense." The word is used of gossip, prattling, babbling, animal sounds, and musical instruments. During the classical period, it usually was employed in a contemptuous sense. Debrunner, writing in the Kittel-Friedrich *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, states "*Lalein* can also be used quite objectively of speech when there is reference to sound rather than meaning." To what kind of utterance can St. Paul refer? There were many types of vocalization in ecstatic rites.

*They have been heard to utter (different voices of equal strength, or with great diversity and inequality), in tones that alternated with silence; and again in other cases harmonious crescendo or diminuendo of tone, and in still other cases other kinds of utterance (Iamblichus, On the Mysteries, III, 4-6).*

We have already mentioned heathen rituals in which frenzied shouting was expected from women and considered a necessary ingredient of the worship. Rogers translates this hymn from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*:

*Call upon Bacchus, afire with his Maenades (mad women);  
Call upon Zeus in the lightning arrayed;  
Call on his queen, ever blessed, adorable;  
Call on the holy, infallible Witnesses,  
Call them to witness the peace and the harmony,  
This which divine Aphrodite has made.*

*Allala! Lalla! Lallala, Lallala!  
Whoop for victory, Lallalalae!  
Evoi! Evoi! Lallala, Lallala!  
Evae! Evae! Lallalalae.*

The word *lalein* is fundamentally an onomatopoeic one, meaning, as Thayer's *Lexicon* puts it, to go "la-la." The Greeks shouted "alala" both in worship and in war, and personified *Alala* as a deity (Pindar, Fr. 208 [78]; Plutarch 2.3496). It was this same repetitive and meaningless syllabification in pagan prayers which Jesus described: "for they think they shall be heard for their much speaking" (Matt. 6:7).

New patterns of Christian worship appear to have been more difficult for women to adopt than men, as they had not known the dignified rite of Apollo or Zeus. For the most

part, their religious expression had been accompanied by extravagances of every sort. We may quote Iamblichus again:

*We affirm, accordingly, not only that the shoutings and choric songs are sacred to the gods, each and all of them, as being peculiarly their own, but likewise that there is a kindred relationship between them in their proper order . . . and the peculiar usages of Sabazian worship make ready for the Bacchic enthusiasm, the purifying of souls, and deliverances from old incriminations, their respective inspirations are, accordingly, different in every important particular.*

*Thou seemest to think that those who are enrapt by the Mother of the gods are males, for thou callest them, accordingly "Mettrizontes" yet that is not true, for the "Mettrizontesae" are chiefly women (op. cit. pp. 121-23).*

Such women must learn that they were purified not through shouting but through the shed blood of Christ and through the washing of the water of the Word.

It was important that the service of worship become meaningful. Women were encouraged to question their husbands at home, since the women had usually been denied an opportunity for education while the men participated vigorously in all manner of theological and philosophical debates. The questions should be asked at home so that the conversation would not disrupt the service. Neither was a woman to gossip or chatter with the other women during the service - surely a great temptation, for Greek women were closely confined to their homes. (On the rare occasions when they were allowed to leave, they were liable to kick over all the traces.) "For it is awful for a woman to gossip in church" - perhaps we should also add "or on the sidewalk in front of the church or on the telephone." And does not the same apply to men? "For in Jesus Christ there is neither . . . male nor female" (Gal. 3:28).

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