

The Case for the Ordination of Men Only Its Use of 1 Corinthians 14:38

The pronouncement of St Paul in 1 Cor 14:38 is an important part of the case against the ordination of women. Since some of those involved in the debate on this issue have not understood how and why it is so significant, I would like to explain how I understand it.

At the outset I want to make it quite clear that in my opinion the issue of recognition which is mentioned in this text does not refer to a person's salvation but about what is taught as God's word. It has to do with the doctrine and practice of ministry. It is very important that we make this quite clear in the debate, for the common opinion is that we reckon that those who promote the ordination of women thereby stand in danger of forfeiting their salvation.

The argument is developed in the following way.

1. This pronouncement is closely linked with the previous verse by the repetition of the conjunction 'If' and by the contrast between 'recognising' (*epiginōskō*) the Lord's command in v 37 and not 'recognising' and 'being unrecognised' (*agnoeō*) in v 38.¹ These two verses form a simple chiasm in which 'recognising' stands in contrast with being 'unrecognised'. The close connection between these two verses explains why Paul does not add an object in the clause: 'If anyone does not recognise'. It is implied from the previous verse. Thus the refusal of those who claim to be prophets and spiritual persons to 'recognise' the Lord's command means that their claims are 'unrecognised'.²
2. Paul's pronouncement in 14:38 applies to those who refuse to recognise that what Paul has just written in this letter is 'the Lord's command'. To what does this refer? The nearest 'command' that Paul has given is to be found in 14:34, where he decrees that 'it is not permitted for them (the women) to speak'.³ His use of the passive form here is rather surprising, for in 1 Tim 2:12 he uses the active form: 'I do not permit a woman to teach.' The passive seems to indicate that he is not speaking by his own authority but about what someone else has commanded. It is best taken as a divine passive. The Lord Jesus does not allow women to be speakers in any of the churches; instead they are to be 'silent' and 'subordinate.' The context backs up this reading since Paul connects this in v 36 with the origin and reception of God's word and in v 37 with the Lord's command that he has written down here in this letter.

¹ While these are different verbs, they share the same root. Paul, most likely uses the verb *agnoeō*, because there is no negative form of *ginōskō* or *epiginōskō*.

² For an assessment and rejection of the variant reading *agnoeitō* for *agnoeitai*, see Bruce M Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies: London/New York 1971 and 1975, 566. The NRSV, however, goes against the general consensus of this by translating: 'Anyone who does not recognise this is not to be recognised.'

³ The only other possible antecedents are Paul's command in 14:12 or the jussive directives in 14:13, 26, 28, 29, 30, 34, 35 by which Paul regulates what happens in the divine service. None of these is in any sense clearly a command of the Lord.

3. While many modern commentators find it hard to make sense of 14:37-38 in its immediate context, most of them agree that *agnoētai*, ‘he is not recognised,’⁴ is a divine passive.⁵ That person is, in some way, not recognised by God. This, of course, also implies that the churches do not recognise those who reject this command. The question is when, why, and how they are not recognised.

In his study on this passage Käsemann argues that this is a case of sacral law, a sentence of divine judgment.⁶ It does not just threaten divine retribution but actually pronounces God’s judgment on those who violate the Lord’s command. This sentence of judgment is couched by St Paul in terms of the *ius talionis*, the law of equivalent retribution. The rejection of the Lord’s command results in his rejection of those who reject it. We find another similar pronouncement of divine judgment 1 Cor 3:17. There Paul says, ‘If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.’⁷

In both these passages Paul uses his apostolic authority to pronounce God’s judgment on certain people who are damaging the church in Corinth.⁸ He does not just warn them about what could happen to them at the last judgment, for then he would use the future tense. Instead he uses the present tense to anticipate that sentence by announcing that they are already judged by God for what they are doing. This pronouncement is a speech act, a performative utterance which enacts what it says, an act of judgment, Paul’s exercise of the keys.⁹ It is obvious that Paul would not pronounce such a judgment for some trivial matter, like disruptive chatter, but only for a severe violation of God’s word.

4. What is meant by Paul’s pronouncement that those who do not recognise the Lord’s command are ‘not recognised’?¹⁰ This, ultimately, refers to divine recognition, or the lack of divine recognition, for their teaching and practice.¹¹

⁴ The NIV translates *agnoētai* incorrectly with the future tense.

⁵ See, for example, Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987, 712; Simon J Kistenmacher, *1 Corinthians*, Baker: Grand Rapids, 1993, 517; Richard B Hays, *1 Corinthians*, John Knox: Louisville, 1997, 244; Raymond F Collins *1 Corinthians*, Liturgical Press: Collegeville, 1999, 523; Anthony C Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2000, 1164; David E Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 2003, 674.

⁶ Ernst Käsemann, “Sentences of Divine Law in the New Testament,” *New Testament Questions of Today*, SCM: London, 1969, 66-81.

⁷ See also 1 Cor 16:22; cf. Matt 5:19; 10:32-33; Mark 8:38; Rev 22:18^b-19.

⁸ Käsemann claims that Paul is exercising his charismatic authority as a Spirit-filled person. But that is only correct if we understand that apostolically. Here, as in 1 Cor 5:1-13, he exercises his apostolic authority to pass judgment on those who reject the Lord’s command (cf. 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10).

⁹ This claim assumes that when Jesus spoke about ‘loosing’ and ‘binding’ in Matt 16:19 and 18:18, he did not just refer to ‘forgiving’ and ‘retaining’ sins but, as was the case with the rabbinical use of these terms, also with determining right doctrine and practice and condemning wrong doctrine and practice (cf. AC 28,21).

¹⁰ The passive of *agnoeō* is used here in a similar sense to 2 Cor 6:9 for a lack of recognition of a person’s status. In a similar way Paul uses the verb *epiginōskō* for the recognition of his coworkers in 1 Cor 16:18 (cf. Matt 16:18) and the verb *ginōskō* for God’s recognition of those who belong to him (1 Cor 8:3; Gal 4:9; 2 Tim 2:19). See also Matt 7:23; 25:12; Luke 13:25, 27.

¹¹ See Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood? A Systematic Analysis in the Light of the Order of Creation and Redemption*, Ignatius: San Francisco, 1988, 383f.

Paul here is addressing those who ‘claim’¹² to speak as ‘prophets’ or to act as ‘spiritual persons’.¹³ Since they use their spiritual authority to reject the Lord’s command, their claim to be prophets and Spirit-filled persons is not recognised by the Lord. Their words and deeds are not the words and deeds of the Holy Spirit. After all, the Spirit that speaks and acts through them cannot contradict the Spirit that inspires Christ and his apostles.¹⁴ So the Lord does not recognise them as prophets or as spiritual people either now or on the last day. Their work is not his work, nor is their speech the word of God. This understanding is consistent with Paul’s distinction between the judgment of a person and the judgment of a person’s work in 1 Cor 3:10-15.¹⁵ If those who work for Christ in the church use what is rejected by him in attempting to build up the church, their work will be undone even though they themselves will still be saved as through fire. The fire of divine judgment will destroy everything that is contrary to Christ and rejected by him.

In 1 Cor 14:38 St Paul exercises his authority as an apostle. He speaks at the Lord’s command to the church in Corinth about what applies to all the churches; he uses the keys to ‘bind’ by teaching that women are not to be speakers in any of the churches and by declaring that the Lord does not recognise the ministry of those who reject that teaching. We may therefore conclude that the Lord recognises the claims of those who teach and act according to his command. They can speak and pray with the confidence that comes from a good conscience and the assurance that this pleases God (1 John 3:21-22).

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¹² See the use of the same term in 1 Cor 3:18; 8:2; 11:16.

¹³ This may refer to those who claim that they are ‘spiritual’ persons because they speak in tongues, but it may also refer to all those who claim to be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ See Anthony C Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2000, 1164.

¹⁵ See also 2 Cor 5:10. Here Paul speaks about what we will receive from Christ as the fruit of our work here on earth.