

Some Words About...

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Sigao (quiet) - σιγάω

The Greek word *sigao* meant to be quiet as contrasted with commotion. After near panic among the Hebrews (Exodus 14:10-12), Moses said, “The Lord will fight for you if you will just keep quiet” (14:13). And Ecclesiastes says that there is “a time to keep quiet and a time to speak” (3:7).

To translate *sigao* as meaning to be silent is going too far. “Silent” implies absolute stillness, while *sigao* indicates a lack of disturbing noise. The point is to reduce sound to a point where it is not irritating rather than to achieve complete soundlessness. A Greek word closer to silence is *hesuchia*.

New Testament

In Luke 9:36 the three who had witnessed the Transfiguration “kept quiet and told no one at that time what they had seen.” The disciples realized that the Transfiguration was a personal event, not a public demonstration of Jesus’ relation to God. They kept quiet about it at the time and did not use it as part of their message. After all, the injunction they had received was “Listen to him,” not “Advertise what you have seen.”

The blind beggar who shouted to Jesus as he passed “was told to be quiet” by those who were in front of him (Luke 18:38-39). Jesus healed the man who didn’t quiet down but followed Jesus glorifying God (18:43). The crowd no longer tried to quiet him, but joined him in praising God. (The whole question of what constitutes creating a disturbance depends on who is being disturbed.)

As Jesus was teaching in the Temple, the Temple authorities sent spies to heckle him and try to trap him (Luke 20:1-26). The hecklers asked him if it was right to pay taxes to the emperor (20:22). When Jesus replied to give to the emperor what was the emperor’s and give to God what was God’s, “they became quiet” (20:26). One wonders which instruction made them quit heckling, the statement that they should give the emperor what was his or the statement that they should give God what was God’s. The latter injunction would be harder for them to follow — harder for us, too.

When Peter himself — and not his messenger — appeared at Mary’s door, the occupants of the house reacted with considerable surprise. So Peter gestured “for them to be quiet” and let him tell them what had happened and instruct them to tell the other Christian leaders about it (Acts 12:17). Peter had just escaped from being chained in prison with four squads of soldiers guarding him. He was still fleeing. He had no time to answer a lot of questions so he quieted the questioners, gave them a brief message for James and others, and then lit out again.

After some heated discussion over what Old Testament injunctions must be imposed upon Christians, Peter pointed out that even Jews were not able to obey every procedure in the tradition. He asked that the Jerusalem Christians hear what Paul and Barnabas had to say. So they “kept quiet and listened to Barnabas and Paul” (Acts 15:12). This Council in Jerusalem is generally held to be the crucial event in the decision that Gentile Christians would not have to become Jews and observe Jewish law.

In Romans 16:25 Paul speaks of a “revelation of a mystery which was kept quiet in ancient time” but is now revealed. The use of *sigao* suggests that the mystery may have been hinted at in the past but was never openly proclaimed.

Apparently Paul felt there was a need for order in the room during worship in the church in Corinth. He devotes the entire fourteenth chapter of First Corinthians to the subject. In 14:27 he makes his bid for the use of a common language to overcome the confusion of many different languages being used at once. After all, Corinth was an important seaport with travelers from all over the Mediterranean. Greek, however, was a universal language and those speaking Greek could be understood by all. So Paul says that if there is no one to interpret a given language for someone praying or prophesying, “let them be quiet and speak to themselves and to God” (14:28).

In Corinth men and women worshiped together, a situation strange to some and which may have produced effects that Paul saw as needing correction. In verse 34 Paul says that women should be quiet in church and should not talk but should show respect. This was, however, not the first item on his agenda for a quiet devotional attitude in worship. It is clear that women both prayed and prophesied in the early church (Acts 21:9), even in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5).

In our time most Christians understand that Paul’s injunctions for women (and others) to be quiet were addressed to a specific situation and were not a general command.

Today

A certain amount of quiet is necessary if we are to think rationally. Noise calls forth a purely emotional response. The crowd that assembled before Pilate was whipped up into a frenzy and cried out “Crucify him!” Overseas, crowds assemble in some countries and shout “Kill!” Emotional fervor is much valued and much exploited. Sporting events have their cheer leaders, and churches have their rally days. And megachurches make meganoises all for a good cause. But somewhere along the line we need to sing “Drop thy still dews of quietness till all our strivings cease.”¹

The Amish are a small Christian sect and nowhere did their essential Christian nature become more evident than when they forgave the man who entered their school and killed nine of their young children last year in Pennsylvania. Then they destroyed the school itself to keep it from becoming a tourist attraction. The Amish are called the Quiet People.

¹ John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892).

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