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# A Survey of Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34-35

KRYSTIN D. HIGGINS

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**A**re women to pray and prophesy (1 Cor 11:5), or are women to remain silent (1 Cor 14:34)? Are women now unified in the body of Christ (Gal 3:28), or are they subordinate (1 Cor 14:34)? These contradictory verses not only make Paul seem schizophrenic, but they also cause divisions in our churches today. First Corinthians 14:34–35 has been a source of contention among churches and scholars for quite some time. Upon considering the various interpretations of the verses, it becomes clear how such varying opinions could come to exist as well as how difficult it is to remain doctrinaire when faced with such a problematic passage. Perhaps this study will also be helpful in allowing members of different views to dialog with each other and to bring unity in the midst of a currently divisive issue.

The discussion of an orderly assembly in chapter 14 begins with an exhortation to pursue love during worship, explaining how love would manifest itself in each activity of worship (prophecy, speaking in tongues, prayer, and singing). Verse 33 then reveals that God is one of peace not disorder, therefore order is possible and desired in worship. Verses 34 and 35 present a segment on women, with 36 continuing the argument against the current behavior of the Corinthians. The contradiction between this passage and the assumptions that seem to underlie Paul's theology elsewhere (particularly that found in 1 Cor 11:2–16), and the two locations in which this passage is found, account for the problematic nature of the two verses. I will survey the most common views on the passage; Paul Watson will follow this with some pastoral implications of these views.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Three main arguments are given for the existence of 1 Cor 14:34–35. (1) The text is purposeful, though the reasons proffered for its inclusion vary. (2) The text is a quotation of the Corinthians that Paul uses to refute their assertion that women cannot speak in the assembly. (3) The verses are an interpolation, the cause of which is also further debated among this view's proponents.

### *Purposeful Text*

A major feminist scholar, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, firmly believes that these verses belong in the text as instructions specifically for *wives*. Wives in Greco-Roman culture were not to speak to other women's husbands. Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that the Corinthian women were not only speaking to other women's husbands, but perhaps pointing out mistakes men may have made in interpreting scripture or prophecies.<sup>1</sup> This behavior would be frowned upon by the culture at large, therefore, "it is not theology but concern for decency and order which determines Paul's regulation concerning the behavior of pneumatic women and men in the worship service of the community (v. 40)."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, she suggests that unmarried virgin women could participate fully in worship services because they didn't have husbands at home of whom to ask their questions and because as virgins these women were particularly holy.<sup>3</sup>

In opposition to Schüssler Fiorenza's view is the fact that the previous regulations that Paul imposes on the church do not target specific people, but only deal with the general order of worship. Also, Schüssler



Fiorenza's suggestion that Paul appeals to the Jewish-Hellenistic missionary tradition of subordinating women means that he would be appealing to an oral tradition in a particularly unqualified manner. However, no precedent exists for this kind of appeal by Paul.<sup>4</sup>

Another suggestion for the purpose of the passage's inclusion is that Paul is curbing disruptive questions posed by women, not requiring absolute silence from them. Craig S. Keener argues that the fault lies in the educational level of the women.<sup>5</sup> They have never been allowed a place in the educational setting and do not realize the etiquette required of them as students and as worship participants. They were not given the opportunity to learn that in their culture it is rude to ask questions that "reflected ignorance of the topic."<sup>6</sup> Continuing the regulations for orderly worship, Paul addresses women who were another cause of disorder

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in worship. Keener suggests that despite the apparently unqualified nature of Paul's command, the injunction for silence holds only until the women learn to conduct themselves properly, i.e., until they quit learning "so *loudly* in church"<sup>7</sup> It is in order that they eventually do learn—but without disrupting the service—that the women are told to ask their questions of their husbands at home. Once they have been properly educated, they may pray and prophesy in keeping with the assumption of 1 Cor 11:2–16.

Others have also thought that the author of 1 Cor 14:34–35 intended merely to *limit* the speech of women. Richard and Catherine Clark Kröger also base their argument on the social background of these disruptive women; however, they place the blame on the

expected behavior of pagan women in worship services.<sup>8</sup> They claim that "much of the shouting involved in the [Bacchic] rite [of religious outcry] was the specific function of women."<sup>9</sup> The problem that Paul faces with the women in Corinth is that they are applying this cacophonous rite to Christian worship. He wants to differentiate the Corinthian Christians from these pagans who are looked down upon by the culture at large and therefore induces the women to silence. That is, he is not asking them to quit speaking altogether, but asking them to refrain from engaging in the pagan rite to which they were accustomed.

Keener argues against this view based on two observations. First, he suggests that ecstatic ravings would not have characterized women alone in pagan rituals. Second, "Paul does not avail himself of the opportunity to condemn any associations with pagan cultic behavior their activity might have displayed."<sup>10</sup>

Making the issue one of authority, James B. Hurley argues that Paul does not contradict himself in 1 Cor 11 and 14, but rather continues the argument. The problem is that after praying and prophesying, women are then judging prophets as well, "thereby assuming the anomalous role of judging men."<sup>11</sup>

Raymond Brown somewhat agrees with Hurley's view but asserts that Paul's apocalyptic worldview accounts for the silencing. Because the Second Coming was near, Paul would have had no time to change social structures to fit the eschatological ideal presented in Gal 3:28. Therefore:

The same Paul who phrased [Gal. 3:28] was capable of sanctioning inequalities among Christians: ...women should not be permitted to speak in the churches and should be subordinate. ...Nevertheless, many Christians recognize a gospel dynamism in Paul's statement that may or even should go beyond this vision.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to this view, one may wish to consult Paul's letter to Philemon in which he tacitly requests that Philemon challenge the prevailing social structure by accepting his slave Onesimus as a brother. He goes

beyond this by further requesting—again tacitly—that Philemon release Onesimus, his new brother in Christ, from slavery.

#### *A Quotation from the Corinthians*

A second stance taken on the problematic nature of 1 Cor 14:34–35 is that Paul is quoting the Corinthians in order to refute their view that women should be subordinate. That is, the Corinthians are suggesting that women ought not speak in the assembly while Paul reprimands them for this view. Neal M. Flanagan and Edwina Hunter Snyder base this argument on the presence of numerous direct and indirect quotations in the letter (1 Cor 1:12, 2:15, 6:12, 6:13, 7:1, 8:1, 8:4, 8:8, 10:23, 11:2, and 15:12).<sup>13</sup> They also propose that this interpretation agrees with Paul's view of women understood in 1 Cor 11:2–16 and Gal 3:28.

Agreeing with Flanagan and Hunter Snyder, Charles H. Talbert points out that the statement following verses 34 and 35 begins with the particle  $\bar{\epsilon}$ , (translated "What!" by the RSV) "whose force indicates that what has come before is refuted by the two-fold rhetorical query that follows."<sup>14</sup> This two-fold query as translated in the NRSV is as follows: "Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?" In these questions, Paul uses the masculine plural form of the word "you" (*monous*), which can refer to a group of males or a group of males and females, but not to females alone. These two observations lead Talbert to conclude that verse 36 is a refutation of verses 34 and 35.<sup>15</sup>

The quotation theory has met with four objections. First, there are no grammatical indicators in the Greek to suggest that Paul is about to quote his opponents (directly or indirectly). However, it has also been pointed out that other quotations—such as that found in 14:22—also lack grammatical indicators yet are obviously quotations.<sup>16</sup> Second, "Paul's citations of the Corinthian positions elsewhere are at least partially affirmed, though seriously qualified."<sup>17</sup> Third, "the other Corinthian views cited by Paul are always short slogans, not extended didactic arguments."<sup>18</sup> And finally, "it presupposes the unlikely scenario that some in the church were forbidding women to speak—and especially that the quotation would come from the same Corinthian letter that is otherwise quite pro-women."<sup>19</sup>

**In this humility we should also be aware of the implications our position on the passage have for the church—the serious implications such a position will have on the men and women of our churches.**

#### *Interpolation*

Some scholars propose that 1 Cor 14:34–35 was added to the original letter for various reasons. Fee wrestles with the fact that early manuscripts have been found that place these two verses in different places. Some locate them after verse 40, while others place them after verse 33. Fee posits three explanations for this discrepancy:

- Paul wrote these words at this place and they were deliberately transposed to a position after v. 40.
- The reverse of this, they were written originally after v. 40 and someone moved them forward to a position after v. 33.
- They were not part of the original text, but were a very early marginal gloss that was subsequently placed in the text at two different places.<sup>20</sup>



Some such as Keener object to the idea of interpolation because “this proposal does not suggest a mere scribal mistake, but a deliberate change of the sort that ought to have been extremely rare in the earliest stage of the manuscript tradition.”<sup>21</sup> Others, however, argue that 1 Corinthians came to exist in a culture far different from our own, in which it was not objectionable to add to another’s intellectual work.

Schüssler Fiorenza disagrees with the suggestion of interpolation as well. Offering an alternative reason for the verses’ displacement, she asserts, “The only solid hypothesis is that an innovative copyist at the root of the Latin-related tradition omitted these verses, whether by accident or on purpose to defend women prophets, and she/he or a corrector put them back hurriedly in the wrong place.”<sup>22</sup> Fee, on the other hand, points out that editing a text to find a more appropriate location does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament and no adequate reason can be found for placing the text after verse 40 if it was originally after verse 33.<sup>23</sup>

Others have noted the flow of the text were these two verses removed. They suggest that the text smoothly transitions from verse 33 to verse 36 thematically and structurally. With the removal of the two verses, the text would read: “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, for God is a God not of disorder but of peace. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached? Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.” However, Keener argues that one cannot hold to the interpolation theory based on the appearance of digression. He claims, rather, that Paul is capable of awkward constructions.<sup>24</sup>

Arguing theologically, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor observes that not only does 1 Cor 14:34–35 repudiate 11:11–12, but Paul never appeals to the Law for support in a disciplinary matter but in fact refuses to impose a moral decision on the Corinthians (5:1–5).<sup>25</sup> Additionally, no such law can be found to which Paul might be referring. Both Murphy-O’Connor and Wayne Meeks explain how generations after Paul reacted against his policies and sought to restrict the roles of women in light of cultural practices.<sup>26</sup> Fee, proposing a less purposeful introduction of the passage, maintains “that the words were first written as a gloss in the margin by someone who, probably in light of 1 Tim 2:9–15, felt the need to qualify Paul’s instructions even further.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, “although these two verses are found in all known manuscripts, either here or at the end of the chapter, the two text-critical criteria of transcriptional and intrinsic probability combine to cast considerable doubt on their authenticity.”<sup>28</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Given the complexity of the issue and the convincing arguments for each position on 1 Cor 14:34–35, it is difficult to draw a decisive conclusion. That the words were Paul’s own is the most convincing textually, yet this statement appears to contradict an assumption behind a passage earlier in the same letter: women are praying and prophesying (1 Cor 11:11–12). He does not condemn *that* women are praying and prophesying but the *way* in which they are praying and prophesying.

Based on content, the suggestion that Paul is quoting the Corinthians is compelling; however, textually it is weak. The quotation theory might account for the apparent contradictions in Paul’s statements, however, it does not account for the lack of grammatical indicators or the fact that this quotation would be longer than any other quotation Paul incorporates into his letter. Additionally, Paul’s response in the form of rhetorical questions is not a particularly strong or definitive response.

That this text is an interpolation is also a persuasive notion based on content. However, again, the difficulties lie in textual evidence. The problem here is that no manuscripts lack the passage and only a few place it after verse 40. Those that do place the passage after verse 40 are also closely related. The oldest discovered manuscripts, however, place the text after verse 33. If this were a marginal note accidentally incorporated into the text, the incorporation happened very early on: a less likely possibility.

Therefore, while each notion has its strengths, each also has its very real weaknesses. We must consequently approach this text with humility, understanding that it is fraught with difficulties. In this humility we should also be aware of the implications our position on the passage have for the church—the serious implications such a position will have on the men and women of our churches. While I also am tempted to offer a definitive conclusion, I realize that part of the problem with the text is me. Obviously, I want the text to support *my* view on the “role” of women in the church. Recognizing this, I must struggle all the more to approach the text openly, humbly, and prayerfully.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, (New York: Crossroads, 1998), 232.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 233.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 231.
- 4 Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), 707 (note footnote 36 in particular).
- 5 Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992).
- 6 C. S. Keener, “Man and Woman,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 590.
- 7 Keener, 72.
- 8 Richard Kröger and Catherine Clark Kröger. “Pandemonium and Silence at Corinth,” *The Reformed Journal* (June 1978): 6–11.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 10 Keener, 77.
- 11 James B. Hurley, “Did Paul Require Veils or the Silence of Women? A Consideration of I Cor. 11:2–16 and I Cor. 14:33b–36,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (1973): 217.
- 12 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997): 480.
- 13 Neal M. Flanagan, and Edwina Hunter Snyder, “Did Paul Put Down Women in 1 Cor. 14:34–35?” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11 (1981): 10–12.
- 14 Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 92.
- 15 Talbert, 93.
- 16 I am indebted to Markus McDowell for pointing this out in a conversation about this passage.
- 17 Keener, 76.
- 18 Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*. (Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1997): 248.
- 19 Fee, 705.
- 20 Fee, 699.
- 21 Keener, 74.
- 22 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 186.
- 23 Fee, 700.
- 24 Keener, 88.
- 25 Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *1 Corinthians* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 150.
- 26 Murphy –O'Connor, 151; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983): 71. See also Richard A. Horsley, *Christian Tolerance: Paul's Message to the Modern Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).
- 27 Fee, 705.
- 28 Fee, 699. For general theological views of women as discerned through the New Testament generally and Pauline writings specifically, see Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993); Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966); and Ben Witherington, III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Robert Jewett, *Paul the Apostle to America: Cultural Trends and Pauline Scholarship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); Robert Jewett, “The Sexual Liberation of the Apostle Paul,” *JAAR Supplement* 47 (1979): 55–87.