

A Community Without Barriers Conference

How to Read the Scriptures

A Case Study of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Thomas Robinson, December 4, 2010

The Scriptures on a “Welcome” Card

A person surprised at the participation of women in our worship service writes on their card, “Have you never read 1 Cor 14:34-35 or 1 Tim 2:11-12?” These texts are read as a clear, unambiguous ruling that women must not speak publically in church: “The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says.” “Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.”

For people who honor the Bible as authoritative, the case is certainly strong – open and shut. In many churches the only leeway that is given is that women may sing (not speak). They cannot take such roles as passing communion trays or teaching boys after they’ve been baptized, though behind the scenes they may be the strength of a church.

A Sense of Dissonance and Seeking God’s Will

The dissonance: There is an increasing sense of the church as the one place in society that silences women: Women all across the political spectrum fill offices of great responsibility. Women are as well educated as men, lead major corporations, etc., etc.

But for many in our churches, these scriptures, as traditionally read and applied, stand as a wall against women’s public leadership. If it is genuinely God’s will that women be silent in church, it does not matter if a woman becomes president of the United States, she still should not be allowed to lead a public prayer or read scripture in a worship service. I agree! The question is what is God’s will as revealed in scripture.

The argument: My aim today is to show that the scriptures never intended to silence or disempower women in general in any aspect of the church’s work, public or private, and that, on the contrary, it is important for the church today to make full use of the spiritual gifts of both women and men. There is so much that can be discussed – accounts of women’s ministry, positive examples of women in scripture, testimonies of women in leadership, etc. But first we must know that we are following God’s will.

Scripture as the Revelation of God

We believe in the authority and centrality of the scriptures. Through them we know God and Jesus Christ and the Gospel. God has chosen to let us know him through the scripture. We also seek to restore NT Christianity as much as is possible in our own time.

The Bible as a whole and the New Testament in particular have very distinct characters.

The OT focuses on the great narrative of God’s dealings with Israel as a nation.
God’s call of Abraham, deliverance through Moses, Covenant and Law (Torah),
National failure to keep the covenant law, judgment and promise through prophets,
Through a covenant with David, the hope of an anointed king/Messiah,
National destruction and exile, renewal of commitment to Law.

The NT describes events that fulfill God's promises to Israel but in very unexpected ways.
Jesus as Messiah, God in flesh, crucified, resurrected. Replacing, not renewing, the temple.
A message that includes all nations (Gentiles) without the Law. A new humanity.

The New Testament as Revelation of a New Gospel

God's Choices for the New Testament:

The Story of Jesus four times over. Four different proclamations draw us into Jesus.

The Holy Spirit leads the Gospel into the World – Acts of Apostles

Many Letters: Reading the mail of the early church. Letters to individuals and churches.

A Vision of Victory and Renewal given to John – Revelation

The Dynamic of reading the Letters. The texts restricting women are within letters.

Hearing one side of a conversation. Most letters are responses to particular problems.

Trying to figure out the other side of the conversation, the views of the recipients.

Reconstructing what they are talking about. Often letters allude to things that the writer and recipients both know about, but that are not described clearly in the letter.

The process always engages us as readers in interpreting and applying what a letter says.

Some situations are obvious, some are obscure, all are challenging.

Why God chose letters rather than treatises or law books.

Using letters with all their built-in challenges makes it hard to treat them as law codes or fixed systems of theology.

God wanted the life created by the Gospel to center on Grace, Faith, and transforming relationships with God and believers based on Love, rather than obedience to law.

Letters take us into the life and struggles of a community as they seek to internalize and be transformed by the Gospel. They let us hear the apostles as they deal with concrete problems of communities and guide them to live out the Gospel within the complexities of a community of diverse people within an often hostile pagan environment that they are also striving to reach with the message of the Messiah Jesus.

Affirming Scripture in Ways that Undermine Scripture

But there are ways of understanding the authority of scripture that are not true to the nature of the scriptures themselves and that undermine God's purposes in scripture.

Reading the New Testament as a book of Law.

Reform theology (“regulative principle”) and the New Testament as the church’s “constitution” (Thomas Campbell) – a systematic and comprehensive code of basic Law.

The “hermeneutic” of Command, Approved Example, and Necessary Inference. An important tool in the early history of our movement but with limitations.

A way of receiving Gospels and Letters and turning them into law books.

What we hear when we read a text. The more a text is explicit, can be universalized, is enforceable by authority structures, the more likely it is to become a defining law.

The traditional reading takes 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12 as sentences of law removed from their context and universalized – as if from law books rather than letters.

Women in the Worship Assembly in Corinth - 1 Cor 14:34-35

How should we understand this very influential text within Paul's letter to the Corinthians?

Can we grasp its full meaning within its context as part of Paul's teaching in his letter without abstracting it from its setting as a statement of universal law?

As it is usually translated it is very easy to separate text from context. Nothing in the context is needed in order to understand it or apply it. For example in the RSV:

³⁴ *The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says.* ³⁵ *If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*

Some Questions about the text:

1. Why does Paul say this here? Are there any important connections to the context?
2. Who is the text talking about? The opening reference to "*the women*" seems very broad and inclusive, but the statement, "*let them ask their husbands at home,*" suggests that Paul's reference is much more limited to Christian wives with Christian husbands in Corinth. In the Greek language in which Paul wrote, there is only one word – *gyné* – that is translated either woman or wife according to context. But clearly the choice of translation can make a great difference in English in how we understand the meaning of the text.
3. What is it that the women/wives are saying that must be silenced? V. 34 might indicate that everything a woman says must be silenced, but v 35 suggests that Paul is referring to wives asking questions about things "*they desire to know*" (not about their prophecies or prayers) and that they could better ask those questions at home.
4. What does "in the churches" mean? Is Paul referring to all functions of all the churches everywhere? The word translated "church" is the Greek word *ekklēsia*, which is a very common designation for a public assembly.
5. What is the meaning of "shameful" (Greek *aischros*)? Who feels/experiences this sense of shame? Why is it shameful for women/wives to speak here?

None of these questions is really easy and obvious to answer, especially within a traditional reading. Simply engaging these questions seriously begins to make us as readers aware of the complex dialog that is going on between Paul and the Christians in Corinth and what they are doing. God gave us this teaching in letter form so that we actively enter this dialog and are drawn deeper into the process of understanding.

But if one approaches this text confident that it is simply a statement of law, most of these questions are simply ignored in favor of taking the most explicit, universal, and enforceable parts of the text and making those portions into a general law that silences all women in all churches for all time.

Entering the Dialog and Teaching of the Letter

1 Corinthians is a powerful and complex letter written by Paul to Christians who are former pagans and Jews brought together by Paul's preaching of Jesus. They love their new life and experiences of the Holy Spirit, but many things have become distorted and misunderstood. Paul takes on topic after topic drawing them back to the Gospel.

1 Cor 14 is the last part of a discussion of spiritual gifts (*pneumatika*) that Paul began in 1 Cor 12. There he emphasized that all kinds of spiritual gifts come from the same source, that all are important, and that the Holy Spirit gives those gifts as he chooses.

Prophecy and Tongues in 1 Cor 14

1 Cor 14 is focused from beginning to end on two gifts, speaking in tongues and prophecy. See 14:1-2 and 14:39-40. These two gifts seem especially to be at issue in Corinth.

Paul affirms both gifts but emphasizes that speaking in tongues is private, “*speaking to God*,” by uttering “*mysteries in the Spirit*” – a form of powerful, personal prayer (14:2).

Those who prophesy, by contrast, “*speak to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation*” (14:3). Prophecy, therefore, is far more important in church (that is, in the assembly, *ekklesia*) because it builds up the whole assembly of believers.

If outsiders come into the assembly when prophets are speaking, they will be “*reproved*,” “*called to account*” and end up confessing the “*God is really among you*” (14:24-25). Whereas, if too many are speaking in tongues, that gift that is good in itself will offend them and they will “*say that you are out of your mind*” (14:23).

Paul also gives us readers some hints about how the process of prophecy took place.

Two or three prophets would speak in the assembly and then the others (in the assembly) would weigh or evaluate what was said and approve it or perhaps reject it as not being true prophecy. Then other prophets could speak and the process would be repeated: “*for you can all prophesy one by one so that all may learn and all be encouraged*” (14:31). In the light of what we learn in the rest of the letter, this process of evaluation was very important and must often have been a time of considerable debate and potential conflict. It was probably in these times of prophecy that many of the distorted conceptions that Paul challenges in the letter were first put forward. These had not been sufficiently weighed and critiqued by the assembly.

Does 1 Cor 14:34-35 Belong Where It Is?

Why is this text here? Following a traditional reading, the text really does seem out of place. It begins talking about silencing women in the middle of a discussion of prophecy and speaking in tongues. Some ancient scribes even moved the text to the end of the chapter, and many scholars have thought that the text was a scribal interpolation.

Some have argued that the text is out of place not only in 1 Cor 14 but in the letter as a whole because it contradicts what Paul said earlier in the same letter, in 1 Cor 11:4-5. There, he described both men and women praying and prophesying. He used exactly the same words for the actions of both, the only distinction being that men’s heads were to be uncovered and women’s heads covered.

Why would he discuss what women should wear when they, like men, pray or prophesy, if he knew that a few pages later he was going to silence women completely and forbid them to participate in any public teaching such as prophecy?

The Question of Shame

At the same time, Paul’s discussion in 1 Cor 11:1-16 clearly shows that in the situation in Corinth, the issue of women praying or prophesying publically was fraught with

challenges. Paul uses the same word “shameful” (*aischros*) in 11:6 that he does in 14:35. He also speaks of a woman “disgracing” her head if she prays or prophesies with her head uncovered. Paul gives a bit more detail about the sense of shame, so that we learn that it was considered “shameful” (*aischros*) for a woman to have her hair cut or her head shaved. Both the Corinthians and Paul shared and understood these sensibilities that were widely felt in Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture.

Similarly it was considered shameful for a woman in that culture to speak in a public assembly (14:35). Like the shame of hair cut short, this was a sense of shame felt strongly by the people of their society, not a shame before God.

The issue of shame takes us into a basic problem that arises at many points in 1 Cor. Because of their new life and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Christians were doing many things that could cause offense or shame, from speaking in tongues, to eating foods that Jews found offensive, to women speaking in public assemblies. Paul urges the Corinthians always to strive to minimize the offense so that outsiders may not be put off from hearing the Gospel and being saved (10:32-33).

If it was potentially shameful for a woman to pray or prophesy in public, it was even more objectionable to manifest conflict between husbands and wives in public. A quotation from the 1st century philosopher and moralist Plutarch, illustrates common feelings.

*“Cato expelled from the Senate a man who kissed his own wife in the presence of his daughter. This perhaps was a little severe. But if it is disgraceful (shameful, *aischros*), as it is, for a husband and wife to greet each other and kiss and embrace in the presence of others, is it not more of a disgrace (shame, *aischros*) to air their recriminations and disagreements before others, and ... to indulge in admonition, fault-finding, and plain speaking in the open and without reserve?” (Plutarch, *Moralia*, 139).*

Reading 1 Cor 14:34-35 in Its Context

If we try to read this text within the context where Paul placed it, many of our earlier questions about the text find answers and make sense.

The passage is not inserted as a new or separate topic but is integrally part of Paul’s discussion of speaking in tongues and prophecy.

More specifically, it is a part of the discussion that immediately precedes it. There Paul talks about the practice of prophecy, the weighing of the words of the prophets by others in the assembly, and the importance of good order even when prophets believe that they are speaking by the Spirit.

The important practice of evaluating and sometimes rejecting the statements of prophets opened one obvious situation that had the potential to appear more shameful than a woman praying with head uncovered and more offensive than everyone speaking in tongues. That was a situation in which a wife challenged her husband’s prophecy in the process of the weighing of prophecy. Here the shame or offense is not necessarily inherent in what the wife might say, but is an expression of the strongly felt sensibility of the society – like a woman having her hair cut short or a man having his hair long. There was no corresponding sense of shame about a husband questioning his wife.

Thus, just as Paul says, the gifts of the Holy Spirit led women and men to pray and prophesy – speaking to people for their upbuilding and encouragement (11:4-5; 14:3).

But just as the potential for disgrace and shame meant that women needed to wear head-coverings when they prophesied or prayed in public, so also they had to be careful in the weighing of prophecy.

As wives they should remain quiet and not participate in the weighing, questioning, and evaluation of their husbands' prophecies. Their questions may be very important, but because such public questioning by a wife was considered so offensive, Paul says that they should ask their questions at home in private discussion with their husbands.

In this way the word of God that was truly expressed through prophecy both by men and women would not be made less effective in reaching those who needed to hear it because of behavior that was considered shameful.

Once the text is seen in context as genuinely part of Paul's larger discussion of spiritual gifts, the questions that seemed difficult to answer fall into place. What was needed was to take seriously the inner dialog of the letter between Paul and the Corinthians, as God has given it to us, and to read the text within the life situation of that community.

The principle Paul follows is clear: When women or men are making use of their spiritual gifts, they should do so, but they should strive to do so in a way that causes least offense to outsiders they are trying to reach. When the speaking did not particularly involve spiritual gifts but participation in shared questioning and evaluation, then the potential in ancient Corinth for shame and offense when a wife questioned her husband in public far outweighed the need for her to speak. The wife should remain quiet in the public assembly and ask her questions in a private setting.

Paul never intended in any way to silence the spiritual gifts of women but to empower them to be effective by being aware of the striking innovation they represented in that society and by avoiding unnecessary offensiveness that could make them ineffective.

Here is a paraphrase of the passage in context: 1 Corinthians 14:29-36

²⁹ *Let two or three prophets speak and then let the rest of the assembly evaluate their words.*

³⁰ *If an insight is revealed to another sitting by, let the prophet who is speaking be quiet.* ³¹

In this orderly way you can all prophesy one by one so that all can learn and all be encouraged. ³² *A prophet should not insist on speaking at a particular moment because the*

Spirit's word through the prophet's spirit can be ordered and controlled by the prophet. ³³

God is working in this way among you not to bring about confusion, but as He does in all the assemblies of his holy people, to bring about peace. ³⁴ *The wives in the assemblies, let*

them remain quiet, for it is not best for them to speak (in evaluating their husbands' prophecies), but let good order prevail, as the law tells us. ³⁵ *If there are particular*

questions they desire to raise, let them ask their husbands at home, for everyone knows that it is considered shameful for a wife to speak up, challenging her husband in a public

assembly. ³⁶ *All this is to make it possible for the Word of God to be effective in its impact.*

That word did not start with you, nor does it end with you.